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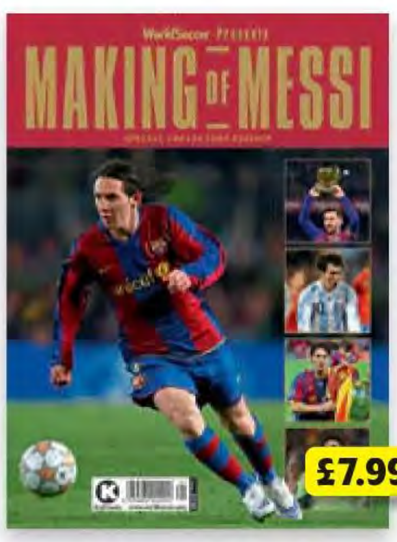

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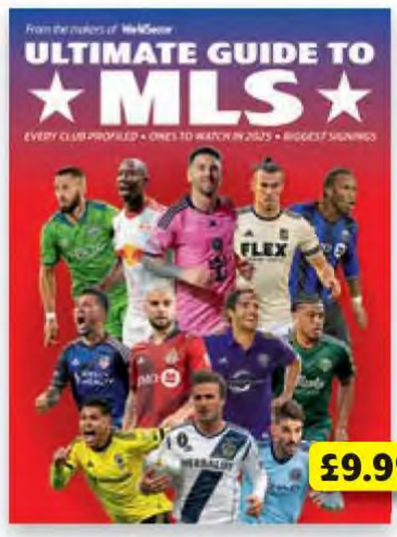

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Next month, we'll be rounding up the Club World Cup, CONCACAF Gold Cup and European Under-21 Championship, but in the meantime we've tried to take stock of everything else: the road to the 2026 World Cup, clubs on the rise in Egypt and Canada, a potential star of the Women's Euros and the Premier League's most expensive player of all time – plus plenty more.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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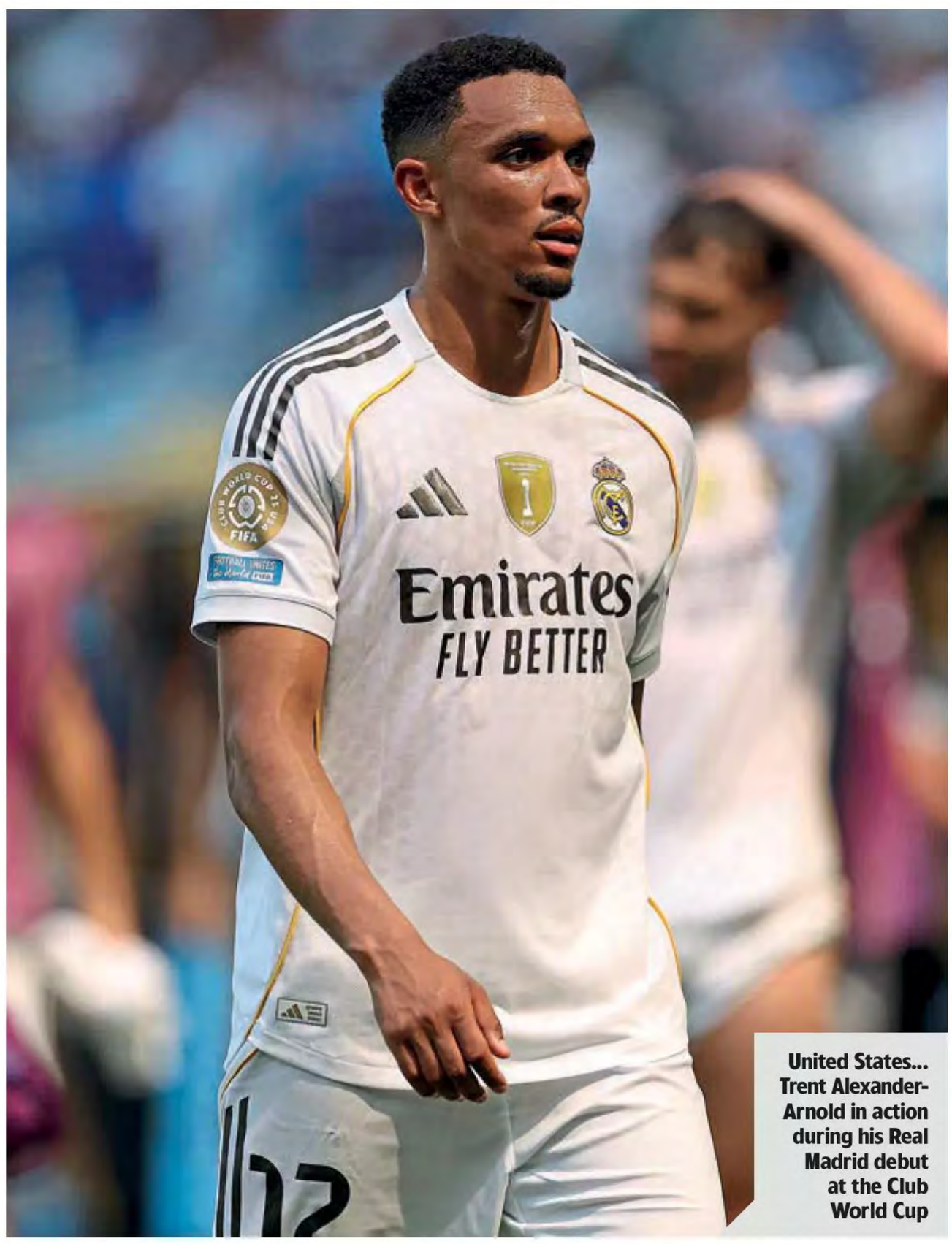

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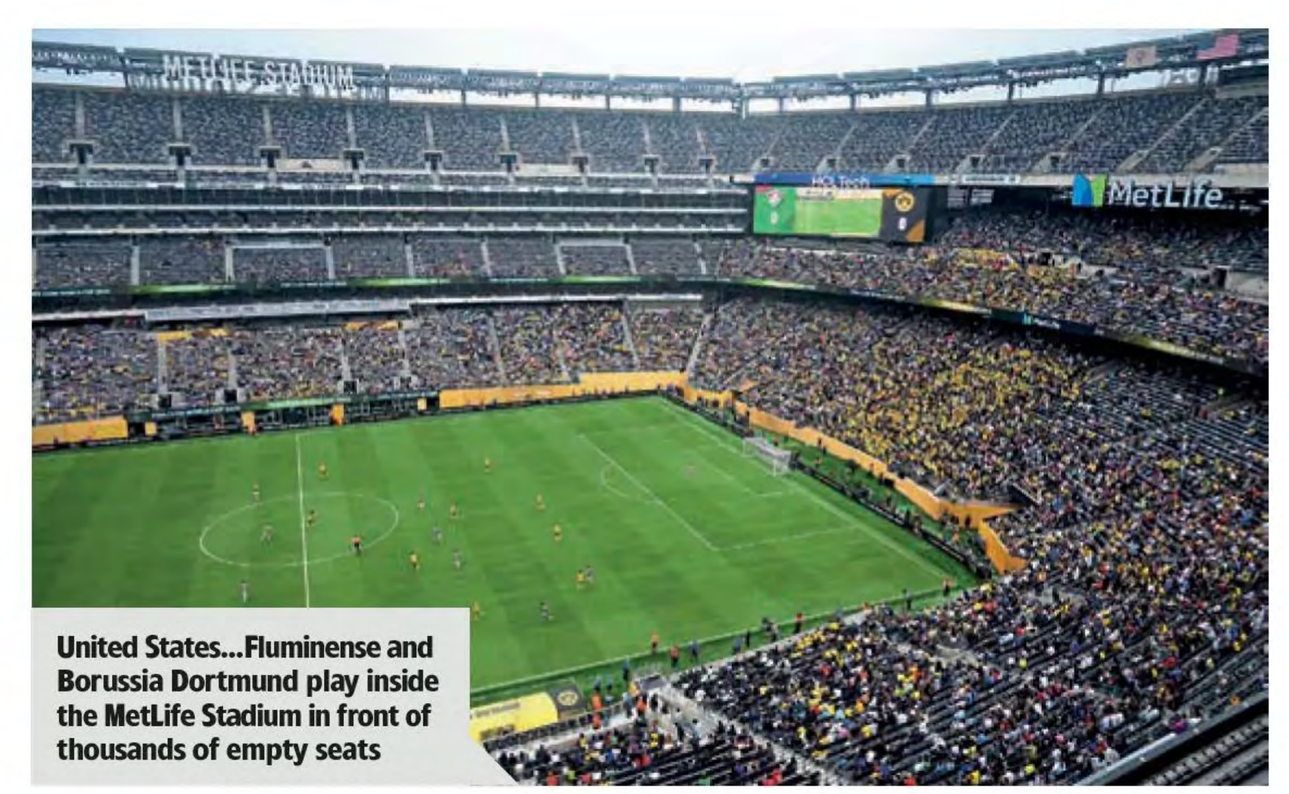

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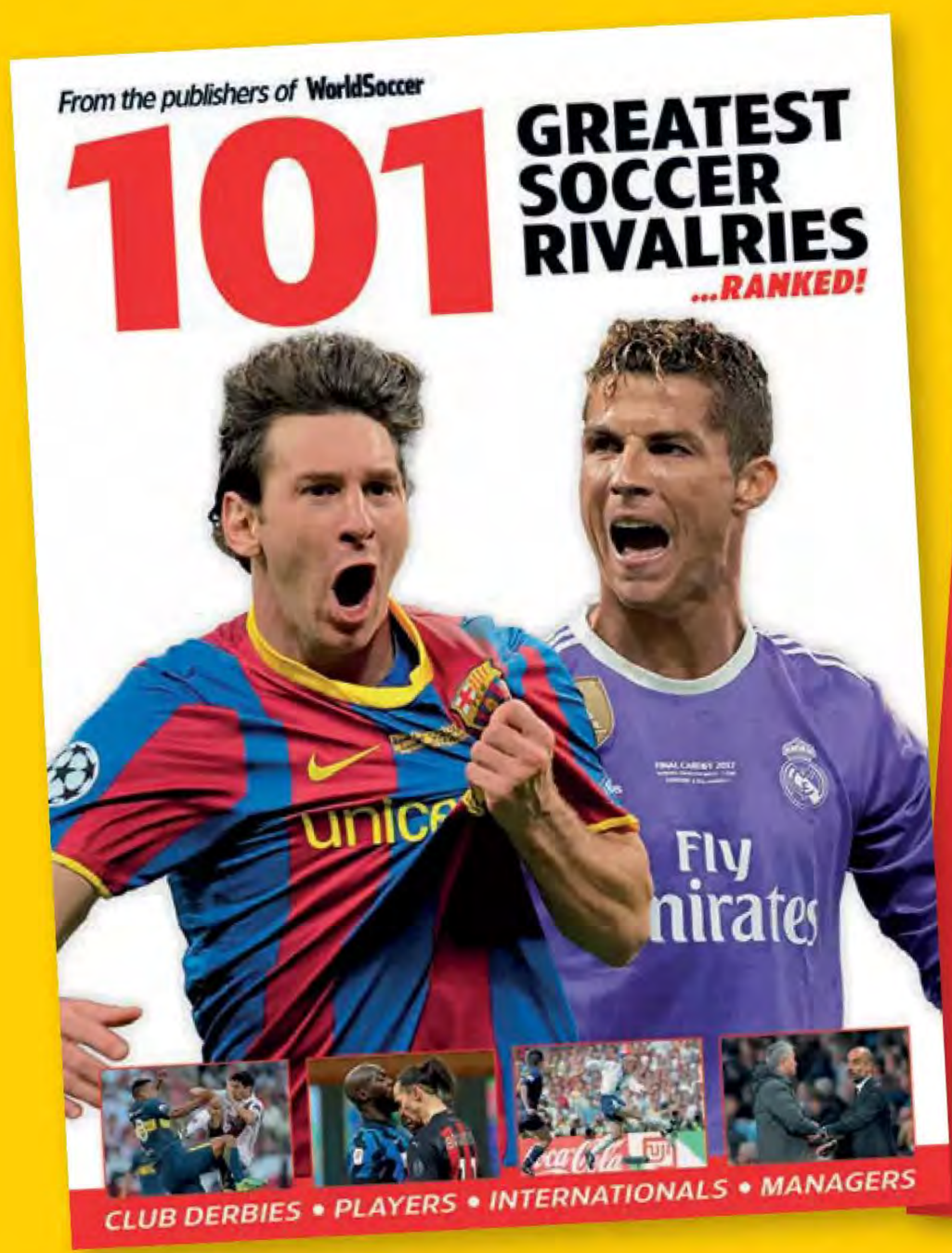

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Henry WINTER

THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Navigating the pathway

It's about the World Cup. That's the target, that's the dream. When those representing England Under-17s, Under-19s and Under-21s reported for duty this summer, they were told they were building towards winning the World Cup. Whether in 2026, 2030 or 2034. The head coach of the Under-21s, Lee Carsley, even put up a photograph of the trophy at England's base camp to concentrate the thoughts of Tino Livramento and Elliot Anderson, two players with realistic hopes of being included in Thomas Tuchel's squad for the 2026 World Cup squad.

To the outside observer, there appears an inherent contradiction at the heart of the FA's international programme. The FA appointed a trophy hit-man, Tuchel, as head coach simply to get England seniors over the line. It's all about the short term. That's why he favours ageing players like Jordan Henderson, now 35, because of their experience. It's why he turned to Dan Burn, now 33.

So how does that fit with the flow of young talent from English academies and the England age-group pathway? Tuchel has given senior debuts to Arsenal teenager Myles Lewis-Skelly and Chelsea's Trevoh Chalobah, 25. Jude Bellingham, Cole Palmer, Levi Colwill and Noni Madueke, all still eligible for the Under-21s but now embedded in the seniors, were first capped by Gareth Southgate and Carsley (in the case of Madueke).

Young Lions... England's U21s, U19s and U17s have all been in action this summer

shone for England in the Under-21 European Championship in Slovakia.

England have fearless young players, expressing themselves in age groups, and there will be serious scrutiny on Tuchel in September if his squad resembles the antiques road show. Fans want Anderson, not Henderson. They want a proper refresh of the squad in age and ideas. Fans have a lot of love for the younger age groups, and plenty of concern over the more cautious seniors. It might be a cultural thing, the weight of expectation inhibiting senior players. It is also about Tuchel believing and trusting in youth and allowing it to express itself.

> The FA appointed Thomas Tuchel as head coach simply to get England seniors over the line...So how does that fit with the flow of young talent?

The prominence of Carsley's Under-21s this summer suggests that others are worthy of consideration, like the intelligent, athletic full-back Livramento and controlling midfielder Anderson. Harvey Elliott, James McAtee, Jarell Quansah and James Beadle were amongst others who

Even though the FA mantra is that the pathway is about development, it is also about trying to win the Under-19 and Under-21 Euros. "I've never been sure why people separate winning and development," the Under-19s head coach Will Antwi told me. "If you don't win you don't go forward, you can't play more games, they don't grow, develop and improve." When asked about his job, Antwi replies: "I work on trying to win the World Cup."

Carsley told me similar. "I feel that we are producing a generation of English players that believe they can win. There is a conveyor-belt of players that aren't happy just to be here. They come here to win." And that will help the seniors – but only if Tuchel backs them.

Community Shield could cross the Atlantic

Is the Community Shield between the Premier League champions and FA Cup winners a competitive trophy? Jose Mourinho began counting it as a major honour, adding it to his total along with rather more significant baubles like the Champions League, Premier League and FA Cup. Pep Guardiola does the same. The media increasingly follows suit, so that adds 16 trophies to Sir Alex Ferguson's total, nine to Arsene Wenger's, seven to Sir Matt Busby, six to Pep and Bob Paisley and five to Jose who's level with Stan Cullis. The time and date for this year's Community Shield showdown, 3pm, August 10, took a while to confirm, causing frustration for followers of Liverpool and Crystal Palace wanting to sort their calendars and travel plans. It also highlighted the enduring interest in the season's curtain raiser, especially now elite coaches deem it a major trophy.

Clubs will also look at the first edition of an expanded Club World Cup in the United States and imagine the reaction if a significant English trophy like the Community Shield were contested there, especially one now hailed as a competitive trophy by Jose and Pep.

Other major European leagues have already made moves in this direction. The Spanish and Italian Super Cups have both been played in the Middle East in recent years. La Liga president Javier Tebas recently declared that he hopes to see Spanish league games played abroad in 2025-26, while there are plans for a Serie A clash in Australia in February.

Winner...Pep Guardiola with his Community Shield winners' medal last summer

The proliferation of American owners in the Premier League will inevitably lead to chatter and concerns about games being taken to the likes of Miami or Atlanta. But taking matches abroad would cause a wave of unified and militant fans' protest not seen since the short-lived European Super League proposal in April 2021. There would be a huge backlash against the owners suggesting damaging the sporting integrity of the Premier League by playing some teams' home games Stateside. Moving the Community Shield to the States would stir some anger, but not insurmountable opposition. It would assuage the TV market demands for competitive English action and also be a knock-dead sell-out occasion. The Community Shield is far easier to move, less emotional (except for the fans of the two clubs). Fistfuls of dollars in return, especially if spent on new signings, would doubtless ease the pain.

Lessons for next year's World Cup

A truer verdict on the Club World Cup can be properly given only when managers, players and organisers reflect and debrief fully on the competition in the weeks after its conclusion on July 13. It's also important that FIFA surveys those fans who travelled to report on their experiences and suggestions. But what did become clear during the tournament was the lessons the American hosts need to learn as they, along with Mexico and Canada, prepare to host the world in 2026.

Three very obvious conclusions already spring to mind. Firstly, kick-off times have to take into account the heat. "Soccer" is not stop-start like gridiron or baseball, or air-conditioned indoors like basketball or ice hockey. Secondly, travel to stadia must be improved for supporters, and cost kept reasonable. Thirdly, have a re-think over the players' individual walk-outs. Nothing wrong with a bit more show-biz – it's America after all – but players having to hang around on the pitch, keeping legs stretched and minds focused, while team-mates come on is not sensible. Many other recommendations will flow in the wake of the Club World Cup as its successes and failures are properly analysed.

Sweltering... players attempt to deal with the heat at the FIFA Club World Cup

Calendar curiosity

This might just be my tiny mind but can somebody please confirm when does a football season actually officially finish? I spoke to players on England senior and Under-21 duty this summer and some would say "this season" when discussing their fortunes in 2024-25 while others would refer to "last season". Confusing. Some statistical records include summer tournament results in the following season. Even more confusing.

For me, the Under-21 European Championship and Club World Cup are part of 2024-25. It's not a major issue in the grand scheme of things but does reflect the chaotic, crammed nature of the football calendar.

• **Ask Henry:** Submit your questions to Henry Winter by subscribing to our newsletter at *worldsoccer.com*

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

Ten years on from FIFA-gate

The lessons learned from the FIFA corruption case that rocked football

FIFA-gate... the world's media congregate outside FIFA's headquarters in May 2015

Gianni Infantino, if he has any time for private reflection between joshing fellow presidents, probably cannot believe his luck. He is the most powerful supremo FIFA has ever had, propelled to a position of Big Brother omnipotence by the power vacuum created by the FIFA-gate scandal.

Harold Wilson once said, famously, that a week is a long time in politics. Hence a decade is an eternity in football politics. Yet anniversary recall remains clear for those of us awakened at six in the morning in Zurich in May 2015 to rush down to the swish Baur au Lac. Here, hotel staff were holding out bed sheets to shield the shame of the seven FIFA powerbrokers slithering into police cars en route to detention and extradition.

"Bizarre" was hardly the word for it.

Later that day Loretta Lynch, then United States Attorney-General, laid bare the multi-million-dollar spider's web of corruption over awards of media rights and World Cup hosting. Ultimately more than 40 individuals and companies were charged, with many later banned from football for life. Several were jailed in the US including, notably, Juan Angel Napout, a former CONMEBOL president, and ex-CBF head Jose Maria Marin.

Even a tremor of the reputational earthquake would have been sufficient to collapse a multi-national corporation. Yet FIFA Congress went ahead two days later and the world governing body not only survived but is now richer and more dominant than back then, its expanded membership more subservient than ever to the leader whose benevolent hand feeds them.

> The world governing body not only survived but is now richer and more dominant than back then

Back then such a transformation appeared impossible. Yet here we have the advent of a 48-team World Cup, a contentiously expanded Club World Cup, a revitalised national team calendar and $2 million annual hand out for each and every one of FIFA's 211 members. What's for them not to like?

Who cares now about the crooks who back then used their status on the FIFA executive committee to line their own pockets? Several are long

since dead, including CONCACAF secretary Chuck Blazer who was "turned" by the FBI and IRS, while others remain safely holed up with the steam appearing long since gone out of the process.

Fairsquare's sports research operation has generated a 170-page report arguing that FIFA is not fit for purpose. The issue is irrelevant. FIFA, for better or worse, is the monopolistic governing body and that's that. The Football Association, back in the early 1920s, did propose a new world governing body in its abhorrence at sharing membership with First World War antagonists. The project was quickly scrapped – and FIFA back then had only 27 members.

FIFA REFORMS

FIFA-gate prompted a reform commission whose members included Infantino, then the UEFA general secretary. The crucial reform was removing decisions on commercial contracts (sponsorship, media rights) from the exco members to the relevant departments.

An expanded, unwieldy, 37-person FIFA Council has thus become a mere rubber stamp for decisions taken by the so-called FIFA Bureau. This comprises the president plus the heads of the six regional confederations. Since the non-European confederations know what is good for them, the president generally gets his way.

The reform committee was headed by Francois Carrard, an avuncular Swiss lawyer more at home in the entitled circles of the International Olympic Committee than the FIFA circus. He envisaged a figurehead president with a powerful chief executive. But nothing was enshrined in statute. Hence Infantino, after being elected in 2016 in the wake of Sepp Blatter's defenestration, immediately took it upon himself to become an executive president (just as he had seen Michel Platini redefine the UEFA presidency after ousting Lennart Johansson in 2007).

The tut-tutting of European media about Infantino's reworking of FIFA in his own image might mislead its audience to infer that football – indeed, international sport in general – was once administered sagely and sensibly. Nothing could be further from the truth. Clubs were created by the players for their own interaction; national and international federations were mere extensions of their good intentions.

We know where that road leads.

The old club committee system was never designed to cope with the complexity, responsibility and, yes, temptation of the vast sums generated initially by sponsorship and later by television and now "media rights". Hence, the game's governance has always been playing catch-up with a hotchpotch jumble of ad hoc regulatory creations. These have included a gaggle of toothless ethics bodies plus financial fair play rules that have only cemented the competitive chasm at club level.

So, at the pinnacle of the game, is today's FIFA an improvement of the House of Blatter? Certainly. Is there room for improvement? Certainly: vast. But likely not under Infantino with his video-communication strategy and ego marked by the double-engraving of his name on the Club World Cup trophy.

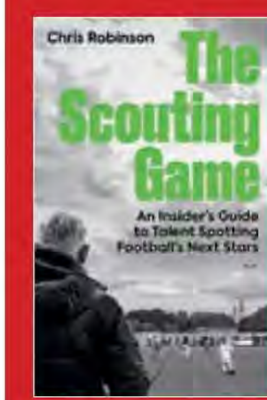
Infantino would have no difficulty in justifying his cosying-up to US President Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The financial health of their World Cups in 2026 and 2034 (and 2030 in between) is essential to keep FIFA and a majority of its members afloat. So maybe the rarefied world in which he lives and works is not so far distant from the lives of the millions who play football for its own sake: men and women, boys and girls.

Is football in crisis, as so many voices suggest? No. The professional game of populist headline is only a fraction of the whole. Grass roots football will still be alive and kicking when Infantino is as distant a memory as FIFA-gate is now.

> FIFA-gate prompted a reform commission whose members included Gianni Infantino, then the UEFA general secretary

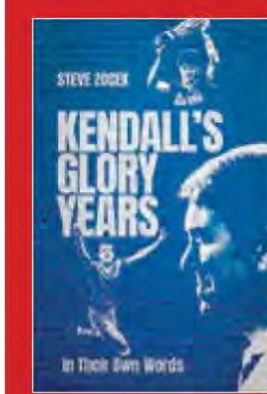
Engraving...FIFA president Gianni Infantino had his name carved on the new Club World Cup trophy

BOOKS THIS MONTH



THE SCOUTING GAME
By Chris Robinson (Pitch Publishing, £16.99)

The Scouting Game: An Insider's Guide to Talent Spotting Football's Next Stars brings us the inside story of the hidden world of top-level football scouting from a man with 30 years' experience in the professional game, and more than a decade in the recruitment team at Chelsea's renowned academy. It reveals how scouts work, what they look for and how they report on players at all levels – grassroots, academy, first team and opposition scouting.



KENDALL'S GLORY YEARS
By Steve Zocek (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Kendall's Glory Years: In Their Own Words sees former Everton players and backroom staff give you the inside track on Howard Kendall's illustrious first spell in charge of the Toffees. Packed with previously untold tales from the Goodison Park dressing room and team-bonding sessions, the book reveals how and why success flowed with Kendall at the helm.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The Grealish enigma

Has Pep Guardiola ground the creativity out of the England winger?

There has been a belief among some, certainly since the 2010 World Cup, that there is something slightly bloodless about the style of football popularised by Pep Guardiola, which has come to shape the play of almost every elite side. That's obviously a generalisation; the football Barcelona played under Guardiola was not the same as that played by Spain under Vicente del Bosque, even if it shared similar principles. For one thing, Barcelona featured an individual of extraordinary talent in the form of Lionel Messi.

Besides which, it was clearly enormously successful. If people found something cold in the precise passing lines and the relentlessness of Guardiola's Bayern Munich or Manchester City at their best, it was a matter of personal taste. Only in this past season, as City struggled, did Guardiola begin to speak of other sides – the likes of Liverpool, Newcastle and Bournemouth – playing a more modern style of football because they have runners who can break the patterns.

Grealish enigma... the winger's days at City seem to be over

"When you play too positional – one, two touches to find a free man – you sometimes lose the initiative from the players to just take their man on and attack the spaces," Bournemouth's manager Andoni Iraola said. Yet in 2021, City had signed just the sort of player who might have been able to take on a defender, might have been able to use individual brilliance to generate space: Jack Grealish.

Or, at least, that's the player Grealish had been. But over his four years at City, Grealish has changed. His signing always seemed a little surprising. At Aston Villa, he had been a free spirit, the creative hub of the team, which didn't seem to fit with the way City played. He also cost £100 million, which was itself a departure from the usual Guardiola method. Yet Grealish adapted, far quicker than many had thought possible. As City won the treble in 2022-23, his nickname among his team-mates was "the Rest Station"; give him the ball and everybody else could take a couple of seconds to recover because they could trust him not to lose it.

> Was he acting under instruction from Guardiola? Or was the lack of dribbles less the cause of Grealish's drop-off than evidence of it?

Ground down...critics say Guardiola's style of play has suppressed Grealish's creativity

In his final season at Villa, Grealish averaged 2.5 dribbles per game in the Premier League. In his first season at City, that dropped to 1.5. The following season, as City did the treble, it was 1.6, since when the figure has dropped, to 0.9 and then 0.7. Those figures are revealing in two ways. First of all, there was a change in how Grealish played after joining City. There was a greater emphasis on retaining possession, but he also had to adapt to a full-back in Joao Cancelo who habitually came inside, rather than the overlapping full-backs he was used to at Villa.

JACK'S DROP-OFF

(Grealish's Premier League stats at Manchester City)

Season	Games *(starts)*	Minutes	Goals	Assists	Dribbles *(per game)*
2021-22	26 *(22)*	1917	3	3	1.5
2022-23	28 *(23)*	2064	5	7	1.6
2023-24	20 *(10)*	1004	3	1	0.9
2024-25	20 *(7)*	716	1	1	0.7

The arrival of Erling Haaland, the summer after Grealish, changed the dynamic again. Haaland, also, was not an obvious Guardiola signing, a centre-forward who did not drop back into midfield, who involved himself very little in build-up play. And yet in his first season, 2022-23, City finally won the Champions League, as part of a treble. The sense was that somewhere in the friction between the control demanded by Guardiola and the more individualistic, City had found a way of playing that achieved the perfect balance.

The question then is why Grealish's dribbles per game fell off after that. Was he acting under instruction from Guardiola – the popular narrative that Guardiola had somehow stolen the joy from his game? Or was the lack of dribbles less the cause of Grealish's drop-off than evidence of it? The reports were that Guardiola was unimpressed by Grealish's enthusiastic celebration of the treble: he started just ten league games in 2023-24 and seven last season. Injuries didn't help, but it was telling that when City needed a goal and inspiration against Crystal Palace in the FA Cup final, Grealish was left on the bench, even as the 19-year-old debutant Claudio Echeverri was brought on.

The message couldn't have been clearer: Grealish's time at City was coming to an end. He was left out of the squad for the Club World Cup. He is only 29. He's unlikely to be short of offers, even as City look to recoup around half of the £100m they paid for him. But the question is what sort of player buying clubs may get. Is this the brilliant but slightly anarchic Grealish of his Villa days, the one Gareth Southgate never entirely trusted for England? Is it the responsible and skilful attacker of his first two seasons at City? Or is it the diffident, drifting figure of the past two seasons unable to hold down a place in the City team not because of some tactical incongruity or personal incompatibility but because some almost indefinable sharpness has been lost?

The truth is that, so opaque are Guardiola's schema, so difficult for outsiders to fathom that, until Grealish joins a new club, nobody can be sure.

Max DOWMAN

(England)

A generational talent of a number ten, a bewitching dribbling machine of sumptuous flair, perfect balance and balletic agility. Comparisons with Barcelona and Spain prodigy Lamine Yamal are by no means overblown. The Arsenal youngster has similar astounding qualities: the ability to effortlessly glide past opponents, the improvisational magic wand, rare vision, remarkable final-ball execution and total fearlessness.

Netted a typically outrageous solo effort in England's 4-2 group-stage win over the Czech Republic and is now the youngest goalscorer in Under-17 European Championship history (15 years, four months and 26 days).

The next prodigious talent – after Myles Lewis-Skelly and Ethan Nwaneri – off the North London club's conveyor belt, Dowman could be fast-tracked for an Arsenal debut in 2025-26.

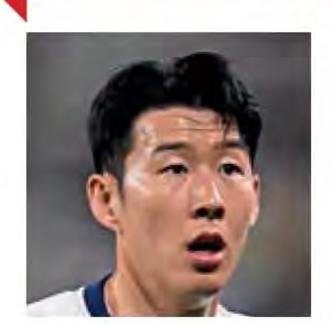
Rafael QUINTAS
(Portugal)
A rather timid character off the pitch, the Benfica defensive midfielder and skipper led splendidly by example as Portugal struck gold. A logical choice as tournament MVP.

Lucas BATBEDAT
(France)
This intelligent and technical left-back appeared marooned when Bordeaux went belly up 12 months ago. Now firmly back in the saddle with the Paris Saint-Germain youth team and France's Under-17s, the competition runners-up in Albania.

Jesse BISIWU
(Belgium)
Always an explosive threat when cutting in from his usual station on the left flank, Bisiwu signed his first pro contract with Club Brugge when only 15 years old and was playing for the club's Under-23s just a year later.

Samuele INACIO
(Italy)
Not only is the Dortmund tyro a brilliant playmaker, he can also finish with the best – picking up the 2025 Euro U17 Golden Boot with five goals. His father, Inacio Pia, who hails from Brazil, used to play for Atalanta and Napoli.

Nick Bidwell



"Ange Postecoglou, you are a Tottenham Hotspur legend forever. Thank you, mate"

Tottenham Hotspur captain Son Heung-min pays tribute to outgoing manager Ange Postecoglou, who was sacked just 16 days after leading the club to the Europa League trophy before being replaced by Brentford's Thomas Frank

12 MOVES *you might have missed…*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Carlos VICENS

After four years as Pep Guardiola's assistant, Vicens left Manchester City to replace Carlos Carvalhal as head coach of **Braga**. The Spaniard first joined City's academy in 2017.

Ole WERNER

RB Leipzig hired the 37-year-old ex-Werder Bremen boss as head coach, while elsewhere in Germany second-tier Schalke recruited Miron Muslic from Plymouth Argyle.

Damien DUFF

Less than a year after guiding **Shelbourne** to the League of Ireland title, Duff stepped down as coach, with reports suggesting he could join Brentford's backroom staff.

Chris COLEMAN

The former Wales manager was sacked by Belgian outfit **OH Leuven** after seven months in charge of the club, which has the same owners as Leicester City.

Russell MARTIN

Rangers appointed the former Swansea City and Southampton manager, who spent six months at Ibrox as a player in 2018, to replace interim head coach Barry Ferguson.

Michael CARRICK

The former Manchester United and England midfielder was sacked by Championship side **Middlesbrough** after missing out on the play-offs for the second season in a row.

Fabio CELESTINI

The man who led Basel back to the Swiss title came under fire after leaving the club for **CSKA Moscow**. He was replaced by Lausanne-Sport boss Ludovic Magnin.

Matias ALMEYDA

After battling relegation last season, **Sevilla** hired their ex-midfielder, who spent the last three years in charge of AEK Athens and won the Greek league-cup double in 2022-23.

Simone INZAGHI

After quitting Internazionale, Inzaghi joined Saudi side **Al Hilal**. He was replaced by Parma's Cristian Chivu, who in turn was replaced by Arsenal assistant coach Carlos Cuesta.

Gian Piero GASPERINI

Amid a flurry of Serie A coach changes, Gasperini joined **Roma**, Ivan Juric replaced him at Atalanta, Max Allegri returned to Milan and Maurizio Sarri went back to Lazio.

Pierre SAGE

Following the departure of former manager Will Still to Southampton, **Lens** turned to Sage as their new head coach. The 46-year-old was fired by Lyon last season.

Kevin DE BRUYNE

The race to sign the out-of-contract midfielder following his Manchester City exit was won by the Italian champions **Napoli**.

More summer signings opposite

"Taking into account the circumstances and a loss of trust in the coach [Michal Probierz], I have decided to resign from playing for the Poland national team for as long as he remains in charge"

Poland's all-time top scorer and record appearance maker Robert Lewandowski makes a statement on his international future after being replaced as national team captain. Just days later, following a 2-1 defeat to Finland, Probierz stepped down

FIRST TRANSFER WINDOW: JUNE 2025

The first transfer window of the summer closed in early June. Here are some of the biggest deals from that opening window...

£62.9m	**MATHEUS CUNHA**	*(Wolves to Manchester United)*
£50m	**Dean HUIJSEN**	*(Bournemouth to Real Madrid)*
£46.6m	**Tijjani REIJNDERS**	*(Milan to Manchester City)*
£32.8m	**Jean-Clair TODIBO**	*(Nice to West Ham United)**
£31.2m	**Rayan AIT-NOURI**	*(Wolves to Manchester City)*
£30.9m	**Rayan CHERKI**	*(Lyon to Manchester City)*
£30.1m	**Liam DELAP**	*(Ipswich Town to Chelsea)*
£29.5m	**Jeremie FRIMPONG**	*(Bayer Leverkusen to Liverpool)*
£27m	**Jobe BELLINGHAM**	*(Sunderland to Borussia Dortmund)*
£23.8m	**Nicolas GONZALEZ**	*(Fiorentina to Juventus)**
£21.2m	**Yan COUTO**	*(Manchester City to Borussia Dortmund)**
£21.2m	**Kevin DANSO**	*(Lens to Tottenham Hotspur)**
£20m	**Enzo LE FEE**	*(Roma to Sunderland)**
£19.5m	**LUIS HENRIQUE**	*(Marseille to Internazionale)*
£18.5m	**Dario ESSUGO**	*(Sporting to Chelsea)*
£17m	**Pierre-Emile HOJBJERG**	*(Tottenham Hotspur to Marseille)**
£16.9m	**Arthur VERMEEREN**	*(Atletico Madrid to RB Leipzig)**
£14.8m	**Michael KAYODE**	*(Fiorentina to Brentford)**
£14.6m	**Lloyd KELLY**	*(Newcastle to Juventus)**
£13.6m	**Ezechiel BANZUZI**	*(OH Leuven to RB Leipzig)*
£12.7m	**Carlos ALCARAZ**	*(Flamengo to Everton)**
£12.7m	**Gabri VEIGA**	*(Al Ahli to Porto)*
£12.5m	**Caoimhin KELLEHER**	*(Liverpool to Brentford)*

United new boy ...Matheus Cunha

Following in Jude's footsteps...BVB's Jobe Bellingham

£12.3m	**Jonathan ROWE**	*(Norwich City to Marseille)**
£12.1m	**Michele DI GREGORIO**	*(Monza to Juventus)**
£12.1m	**Pierre KALULU**	*(Milan to Juventus)**
£12m	**Mamadou SARR**	*(Strasbourg to Chelsea)*
£11.9m	**Bashir HUMPHREYS**	*(Chelsea to Burnley)**
£11.9m	**Petar SUCIC**	*(Dinamo Zagreb to Internazionale)*
£11.4m	**Nicolo FAGIOLI**	*(Juventus to Fiorentina)*
£11.3m	**Nehuen PEREZ**	*(Udinese to Porto)**
£10.2m	**Sofyan AMRABAT**	*(Fiorentina to Fenerbahce)*
£10.2m	**Lorenz ASSIGNON**	*(Rennes to Stuttgart)*
£10.2m	**Said BENRAHMA**	*(Lyon to NEOM)**
£10.2m	**Arthur CABRAL**	*(Benfica to Botafogo)*
£10.2m	**Ibrahim MAZA**	*(Hertha Berlin to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£10m	**Trent ALEXANDER-ARNOLD**	*(Liverpool to Real Madrid)*
£10m	**Tom WATSON**	*(Sunderland to Brighton)*
£9.3m	**Luka VUSKOVIC**	*(Hajduk Split to Tottenham Hotspur)*
£8.5m	**Marcus EDWARDS**	*(Sporting to Burnley)**
£8.5m	**Mark FLEKKEN**	*(Brentford to Bayer Leverkusen)*
£8.5m	**Kendry PAEZ**	*(Independiente del Valle to Chelsea)*
£8.5m	**Krzysztof PIATEK**	*(Istanbul Basaksehir to Al Duhail)*
£8.5m	**Sem STEIJN**	*(Twente to Feyenoord)*
£8.4m	**Benedict HOLLERBACH**	*(Union Berlin to Mainz)*
£8.4m	**Cyriaque IRIE**	*(Troyes to Freiburg)*

**Loan made permanent*

FREE TRANSFERS

Raul ALBIOL	*(Villarreal to free agent)*
Marko ARNAUTOVIC	*(Internazionale to free agent)*
Cesar AZPILICUETA	*(Atletico Madrid to free agent)*
Asmir BEGOVIC	*(Everton to free agent)*
Walter BENITEZ	*(PSV to Crystal Palace)*
Tom BISCHOF	*(Hoffenheim to Bayern Munich)*
Oliver BURKE	*(Werder Bremen to Union Berlin)*
Vladimir COUFAL	*(West Ham United to free agent)*
Jonathan DAVID	*(Lille to free agent)*
Kevin DE BRUYNE	*(Manchester City to Napoli)*
Angel DI MARIA	*(Benfica to Rosario Central)*
Eric DIER	*(Bayern Munich to Monaco)*
Abdoulaye DOUCOURE	*(Everton to free agent)*
Edin DZEKO	*(Fenerbahce to Fiorentina)*
CJ EGAN-RILEY	*(Burnley to Marseille)*
Christian ERIKSEN	*(Manchester United to free agent)*
Lukasz FABIANSKI	*(West Ham United to free agent)*
Angel GOMES	*(Lille to Marseille)*
Danny INGS	*(West Ham United to free agent)*
JORGINHO	*(Arsenal to Flamengo)*
Stefan LAINER	*(B. M'Gladbach to Red Bull Salzburg)*
Alexandre LACAZETTE	*(Lyon to free agent)*
Clement LENGLET	*(Barcelona to Atletico Madrid)*

Flamengo free... Jorginho left Arsenal

Twilight years...Madrid farewell for Modric

Victor LINDELOF	*(Manchester United to free agent)*
Ben MEE	*(Brentford to free agent)*
Dries MERTENS	*(Galatasaray to free agent)*
Luka MODRIC	*(Real Madrid to free agent)*
Thomas MULLER	*(Bayern Munich to free agent)*
Lukas NMECHA	*(Wolfsburg to Leeds United)*
Robin OLSEN	*(Aston Villa to Malmo)*
Sergio REGUILON	*(Tottenham Hotspur to free agent)*
Leroy SANE	*(Bayern Munich to Galatasaray)*
Pablo SARABIA	*(Wolves to free agent)*
Dusan TADIC	*(Fenerbahce to free agent)*
Jonathan TAH	*(Bayer Leverkusen to Bayern Munich)*
Kieran TIERNEY	*(Arsenal to Celtic)*
Jamie VARDY	*(Leicester City to free agent)*
Lucas VAZQUEZ	*(Real Madrid to free agent)*
Carlos VINICIUS	*(Fulham to free agent)*
Kyle WALKER-PETERS	*(Southampton to free agent)*
Joel WARD	*(Crystal Palace to free agent)*
WILLIAN	*(Fulham to free agent)*
Axel WITSEL	*(Atletico Madrid to free agent)*
Ashley YOUNG	*(Everton to free agent)*
Hakim ZIYECH	*(Al Duhail to free agent)*
Kurt ZOUMA	*(West Ham United to free agent)*

"I made [Brazil] available to host the next [Club] World Cup. [Gianni Infantino] was very happy and said that it was totally possible. Now we are going to work to make it happen"

Samir Xaud, the new president of the Brazilian FA, puts his country up for hosting the 2029 Club World Cup

OBITUARIES

Waleed AL JASEM
(1959-2025)
Defender who played 44 times for Kuwait, including the 1-0 loss to England and 4-1 defeat to France at the 1982 World Cup, the latter of which was interrupted when KFA president Sheikh Fahad Al Ahmed Al Sabah stalked on to the pitch to protest against a France goal (subsequently disallowed). Spent his entire senior career with Kuwait SC.

ARTUR SANTOS
(1931-2025)
Defender Artur Santos played 382 times for Benfica between 1950 and 1961, retiring immediately after their first European Cup success, a 3-2 win against Barcelona. Helped the club win five league titles and four Portuguese Cups yet played only twice for Portugal.

Bill ASPREY
(1936-2025)
Long-serving Stoke City right-back who made 341 appearances between 1953 and 1966, latterly as a team-mate of Sir Stanley Matthews. Coaching posts included Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Syria, Stoke and Iraq Under-23s.

Sabirou BASSA-DJERI
(1987-2025)
Goalkeeper who played 15 times for Togo between 2017 and 2019 and won league titles in Cameroon with Coton Sport and Nigeria with Enyimba.

Erroll BENNETT
(1950-2025)
Police officer whose 46 appearances in Tahiti's attack included the inaugural 1973 Oceania Cup. He scored three goals in the tournament but ended up on the wrong end of a 2-0 defeat by New Zealand in the final.

In 1972, he spent six months in France with Paris Saint-Germain, which had been formed just two years earlier, before returning to Tahiti and former club Papeete, for whom he won 14 league titles and nine cups plus three South Pacific Games with his country.

Such was his vast influence over Tahitian football, that after converting to Mormonism and consequently refusing to play on Sundays, all the other teams in the league agreed to move their fixtures to midweek.

Juan Carlos CARONE
(1942-2025)
Right-footed left-winger who scored 76 goals in 149 Argentinian league games for Velez Sarsfield between 1964 and 1969. Once described by legendary goalkeeper Amadeo Carrizo as the "greatest scoundrel in Argentinian football" for his use of off-the-ball dark arts. Carone was 19-goal league top scorer in 1965 and helped Velez win the 1968 national championship. Also had brief spells with Atlanta, Racing and Mexico's Veracruz. Scored twice in five games for Argentina in 1966-67.

Pavel CHALOUPKA
(1959-2025)
Midfielder who won 20 caps for Czechoslovakia between 1981 and 1987 and counted the 1982 World Cup as the pinnacle of his career. Spent most of his club career with Bohemians Praha, before moving to Germany with Fortuna Dusseldorf and Dynamo Berlin.

John CLARK
(1941-2025)
One of Celtic's "Lisbon Lions" that won the 1967 European Cup, starting at the heart of defence for the 2-1 win over Inter. Clark also won four league titles in a career spanning more than 300 games at Celtic, and later worked for the club as a youth coach and assistant manager. Also played for Morton, and managed Cowdenbeath, Stranraer and Clyde.

Stoke star...Bill Asprey in 1964

Nol DE RUITER
(1940-2025)
Rinus Michels' assistant when the Netherlands won Euro 1988 following a Dutch Cup win as manager of Utrecht in 1985. He was also *Oranje* caretaker coach briefly in 1990 (between spells as Under-21 boss) and was head coach of Egypt in 1994 and early 1995.

Malcolm ELIAS
(1953-2024)
A renowned academy coach who worked at Liverpool, Southampton and Fulham, the Welshman was credited with developing such talents as Theo Walcott, Gareth Bale, Trent Alexander-Arnold and Harvey Elliott.

Gerry FRANCIS
(1933-2025)
Francis was the first black South African to play English First Division football in the apartheid era. Born in Johannesburg, he scored nine goals in 50 appearances for Leeds United between 1957 and 1961.

Kiril IVKOV
(1946-2025)
Bulgarian Player of the Year in 1974 and 1975. Defender in the squad that won silver at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico and went on to appear at the 1974 World Cup. Captained Bulgaria in ten of his 44 caps between 1968 and 1979.

Lisbon Lion...John Clark in action for Celtic v Tottenham

"This decision was clearly unfair to our national team. The complaint calls for a comprehensive investigation into the circumstances surrounding this incident"

The Palestine FA complains to FIFA over a controversial penalty in their World Cup qualifier with Oman

Bernard LACOMBE
(1952-2025)
Outstanding and selfless centre-forward who was the perfect attacking foil for Platini, Giresse, Tigana and Fernandez when France won the 1984 European Championship on home soil. Lacombe scored 12 goals in 38 internationals, including France's quickest-ever goal at the World Cup – inside 30 seconds of the 1978 group-stage tie against Italy, which was also the first of the finals.

With 255 goals in 497 league games for Lyon, Saint-Etienne and Bordeaux, he is second in the all-time Ligue 1 marksmanship rankings.

Lacombe later managed home-city club Lyon between 1996 and 2000, winning the Intertoto Cup in 1997. Spent 20 years as a special advisor to owner Jean-Michel Aulas. Lacombe won the French league three times with Bordeaux and the cup twice, as well as one Coupe de France with Lyon.

Lyon legend... Bernard Lacombe

Dudley LEWIS
(1962-2025)
Long-serving Swansea City defender, capped once by Wales, who was part of the team that won promotion to the First Division under John Toshack in 1981.

Braulio MUSSO
(1930-2025)
The diminutive left-winger won five Chilean league titles with Universidad de Chile between 1951 and 1968. Restricted to just 14 caps for Chile due to the presence in his position of the legendary Leonel Sanchez. Musso totalled 81 goals in 391 games in 18 seasons with U, his only senior club.

OSVALDINHO
(1945-2025)
A pillar at left-back with Vitoria Guimaraes, for whom he played 254 games in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Ernesto PELLEGRINI
(1940-2025)
Farmer's son who rose to become a catering millionaire and succeed Ivanoe Fraizzoli as president of Internazionale in 1984. Under his leadership, Inter bought German European champion Karl-Heinz Rummenigge and his World Cup-winning compatriots Andreas Brehme, Jurgen Klinsmann and Lothar Matthaus, winning Serie A in 1988-89 as well as an Italian Super Cup and two UEFA Cups. Succeeded by Massimo Moratti in 1995.

Trailblazing referee ...Uriah Rennie

Uriah RENNIE
(1959-2025)
Rennie made history as the first black referee in the English Premier League. He refereed more than 300 professional matches, including 175 Premier League games, between 1997 and 2008. A trailblazer for diversity in football, shrugging off abuse as "all part and parcel of the game." Career incidents included having to abandon his top-level debut, between Derby County and Wimbledon, when the new Pride Park floodlights failed and red cards for, among others, Gary Neville and Alan Shearer. Rennie was a FIFA referee from 2000 to 2004 and, at the time of his death, chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University.

Ignacio RODRIGUEZ
(1956-2025)
Rodriguez was host nation Mexico's third-choice goalkeeper at the 1986 World Cup. Played his club football with Zacatepec, Atlante and Tigres UANL.

Willie STEVENSON
(1939-2025)
Long-striding left-half who was a stalwart of Bill Shankly's first trophy-winning Liverpool team in the 1960s. Stevenson made his name with Rangers, winning the Scottish league title in 1959 and cup in 1960 before moving south. He was one of Shankly's first signings after Liverpool's promotion back to the top flight and played a significant role in the 1964 and 1966 First Division title wins and their first-ever FA Cup victory in 1965. Later joined Stoke City, Tranmere Rovers and Vancouver Whitecaps.

Liverpool stalwart...Willie Stevenson

Juan Ramon VERON
(1944-2025)
Goalscoring left-winger with Osvaldo Zubeldia's notorious Estudiantes team that won a Copa Libertadores hat-trick between 1968 and 1970. Nicknamed *La Bruja* (The Witch), he scored a decisive goal at Old Trafford to help land the 1968 Intercontinental Cup at the expense of Manchester United.

Scored 90 goals in 324 games before moving to Greece, scoring 22 goals in 57 games with Panathinaikos, and then on to Colombia, where he won another league title with Atletico Junior. Played a mere four times for Argentina between 1968 and 1971.

Father of Juan Sebastian Veron, himself a noted international and Estudiantes' current president, who inherited his father's nickname – *La Brujita* (The Little Witch).

Estudiantes legends... Juan Sebastian Veron alongside his late father Juan Ramon Veron

Words by Keir Radnedge, Jamie Evans & Mark Gleeson

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS

Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Gianluigi Donnarumma (Paris Saint-Germain)	15
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	12
Alisson (Liverpool)	9
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	6
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	5
Alex Meret (Napoli)	5
David Raya (Arsenal)	5
Matz Sels (Nottingham Forest)	5
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	4
Wojciech Szczesny (Barcelona)	4
Michele Di Gregorio (Juventus)	3
Caoimhin Kelleher (Liverpool)	3
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	3
David De Gea (Fiorentina)	2
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	2
Franco Israel (Sporting)	2
Inaki Pena (Barcelona)	2
Noah Atubolu (Freiburg)	1
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Bournemouth)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Simon Mignolet (Club Brugge)	1
Vanja Milinkovic-Savic (Torino)	1
Djordje Petrovic (Strasbourg)	1
Rui Silva (Sporting)	1
Lukasz Skorupski (Bologna)	1
Kevin Trapp (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Michael Zetterer (Werder Bremen)	1

DEFENDERS

Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	41
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	26
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	22
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	14
Nuno Mendes (Paris Saint-Germain)	13
Giovanni Di Lorenzo (Napoli)	12
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	10
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	9
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	9
Gabriel (Arsenal)	9
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	7
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	7
William Saliba (Arsenal)	7
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	7
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	6
Marquinhos (Paris Saint-Germain)	6
Inigo Martinez (Barcelona)	6
Willi Orban (RB Leipzig)	6
Amir Rrahmani (Napoli)	6
Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	5
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	5
Kim Min-jae (Bayern Munich)	5
Ibrahima Konate (Liverpool)	5
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	4
Alejandro Balde (Barcelona)	4
Bremer (Juventus)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	4
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	4
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	4
Isak Hien (Atalanta)	4
Marcos Llorente (Atletico Madrid)	4
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	4
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	4
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	3
Clement Lenglet (Atletico Madrid)	3
Willian Pacho (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Ramy Bensebaini (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Alessandro Buongiorno (Napoli)	2
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	2
Lucas Digne (Aston Villa)	2
Robin Gosens (Fiorentina)	2
Dean Huijsen (Bournemouth)	2
Sead Kolasinac (Atalanta)	2
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	2
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	2
Nikola Milenkovic (Nottingham Forest)	2
Murillo (Nottingham Forest)	2
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Dani Vivian (Athletic Club)	2
Ola Aina (Nottingham Forest)	1
Angelino (Roma)	1
Dan Burn (Newcastle United)	1
Juan Cabal (Juventus)	1
Andrea Cambiaso (Juventus)	1
Levi Colwill (Chelsea)	1
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	1
Eric Dier (Bayern Munich)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Dodo (Fiorentina)	1
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Matthias Ginter (Freiburg)	1
Raphael Guerreiro (Bayern Munich)	1
Jorrel Hato (Ajax)	1
Caio Henrique (Monaco)	1
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Moritz Jenz (Mainz)	1
Juan Jesus (Napoli)	1
Marc-Oliver Kempf (Como)	1
Rasmus Kristensen (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Robin Koch (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Dominik Kohr (Mainz)	1
Maxence Lacroix (Crystal Palace)	1
Diego Llorente (Real Betis)	1
Ian Maatsen (Aston Villa)	1
Ferland Mendy (Real Madrid)	1
Tyrone Mings (Aston Villa)	1
Pedro Porro (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Nelson Semedo (Wolves)	1
Oumar Solet (Udinese)	1
Leonardo Spinazzola (Napoli)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Nicolas Tagliafico (Lyon)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	1
Pau Torres (Aston Villa)	1
Jan Paul van Hecke (Brighton)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Scott McTominay (Napoli)	21
Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	20
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	18
Pedri (Barcelona)	15
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	14
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	14
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	13
Vitinha (Paris Saint-Germain)	13
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	10
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	10
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	9
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	9
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	8
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	6
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	6
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	6
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	5
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	4
Eberechi Eze (Crystal Palace)	4
Fabian Ruiz (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	4
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	4
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	4
Marten de Roon (Atalanta)	3
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	3
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	3
Joao Neves (Paris Saint-Germain)	3

TEAM OF THE SEASON

(Based on cumulative votes through the season)

Adrien Rabiot (Marseille)	3
Marc Casado (Barcelona)	2
Davide Frattesi (Internazionale)	2
Leon Goretzka (Bayern Munich)	2
Bruno Guimaraes (Newcastle United)	2
Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	2
Nadiem Amiri (Mainz)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Eduardo Camavinga (Real Madrid)	1
Johnny Cardoso (Real Betis)	1
Mikkel Damsgaard (Brentford)	1
Angel Di Maria (Benfica)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Morgan Gibbs-White (Nottingham Forest)	1
Morten Hjulmand (Sporting)	1
Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg (Marseille)	1
Ardon Jashari (Club Brugge)	1
Stanislav Lobotka (Napoli)	1

James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Luka Modric (Real Madrid)	1
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	1
Dani Olmo (Barcelona)	1
Aleksandar Pavlovic (Bayern Munich)	1
Rodri (Manchester City)	1
Jesus Rodriguez (Real Betis)	1
Oihan Sancet (Athletic Club)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Malik Tillman (PSV)	1
Lucas Torreira (Galatasaray)	1
Hans Vanaken (Club Brugge)	1
Joey Veerman (PSV)	1
Piotr Zielinski (Internazionale)	1

FORWARDS

Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	43
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	32
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	32
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	26
Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	24
Ousmane Dembele (Paris Saint-Germain)	23

Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	17
Raphinha (Barcelona)	17
Desire Doue (Paris Saint-Germain)	11
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	11
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	8
Omar Marmoush (Manchester City)	8
Khvicha Kvaratskhelia (Paris Saint-Germain)	7
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	6
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	5
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	5
Cody Gakpo (Liverpool)	4
Ademola Lookman (Atalanta)	4
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Kerem Akturkoglu (Benfica)	3
Bradley Barcola (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	3
Mateo Retegui (Atalanta)	3
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	3
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Serhou Guirassy (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Justin Kluivert (Bournemouth)	2
Riccardo Orsolini (Bologna)	2

Alexander Sorloth (Atletico Madrid)	2
Mattia Zaccagni (Lazio)	2
Samu Aghehowa (Porto)	1
Ayoze Perez (Villarreal)	1
Ashley Barnes (Newcastle United)	1
Jamie Gittens (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Kai Havertz (Arsenal)	1
Joao Pedro (Brighton)	1
Randal Kolo Muani (Juventus)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Alassane Plea (Borussia M'gladbach)	1
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	1
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	1
Giuliano Simeone (Atletico Madrid)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Chemsdine Talbi (Club Brugge)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Francisco Trincao (Sporting)	1
Timothy Weah (Juventus)	1
Nico Williams (Athletic Club)	1
Chris Wood (Nottingham Forest)	1

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ESM
EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

Magic Mbappe

After winning the top scorer prize seven times in a row in his domestic league (six times in France and once in Spain), Kylian Mbappe finally has a European Golden Shoe to go with it, becoming only the third Real Madrid player after Cristiano Ronaldo and Hugo Sanchez to claim the award.

Mbappe's tally of 31 goals in his debut season in Spain saw him edge out Sporting striker Viktor Gyokeres and prolific Liverpool talisman Mohamed Salah to the gong, though it is the lowest Golden Shoe-winning tally for 11 years – Luis Suarez and Cristiano Ronaldo also scored 31 goals when jointly winning the prize in 2013-14.

As in former years the award winner is decided on points using UEFA's coefficient ranking system, which rewards players in the most competitive leagues. Hence marksmen from England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain benefit from a points multiplier of two. The official ranking does not include play-offs or cup matches.

Top of the charts... Mbappe

Runner-up... Sporting's Gyokeres

ESM GOLDEN SHOE 2024-25: FINAL RANKINGS

Pos	Name	Goals	Factor	Pts
1	**Kylian Mbappe** *(Real Madrid)*	31	2	62
2	**Viktor Gyokeres** *(Sporting)*	39	1.5	58.5
3	**Mohamed Salah** *(Liverpool)*	29	2	58
4	**Robert Lewandowski** *(Barcelona)*	27	2	54
5	**Harry Kane** *(Bayern Munich)*	26	2	52
6	**Mateo Retegui** *(Atalanta)*	25	2	50
7	**Alexander Isak** *(Newcastle United)*	23	2	46
8=	**Erling Haaland** *(Manchester City)*	22	2	44
8=	**Omar Marmoush** *(E. Frankfurt/Man City)*	22	2	44
10	**Mika Biereth** *(Sturm Graz/Monaco)*	11/13	1.5/2	42.5
11=	**Ante Budimir** *(Osasuna)*	21	2	42
11=	**Ousmane Dembele** *(PSG)*	21	2	42
11=	**Mason Greenwood** *(Marseille)*	21	2	42
11=	**Serhou Guirassy** *(Borussia Dortmund)*	21	2	42
11=	**Efthymis Koulouris** *(Pogon Szczecin)*	28	1.5	42
11=	**Patrik Schick** *(Bayer Leverkusen)*	21	2	42
17=	**Bryan Mbeumo** *(Brentford)*	20	2	40
17=	**Alexander Sorloth** *(Atletico Madrid)*	20	2	40
17=	**Chris Wood** *(Nottingham Forest)*	20	2	40
20	**Victor Osimhen** *(Galatasaray)*	26	1.5	39
21=	**Ayoze Perez** *(Villarreal)*	19	2	38
21=	**Moise Kean** *(Fiorentina)*	19	2	38
21=	**Yoane Wissa** *(Brentford)*	19	2	38
24=	**Jonathan Burkhardt** *(Mainz)*	18	2	36
24=	**Raphinha** *(Barcelona)*	18	2	36
24=	**Sem Steijn** *(FC Twente)*	24	1.5	36
27=	**Julian Alvarez** *(Atletico Madrid)*	17	2	34
27=	**Arnaud Kalimuendo** *(Rennes)*	17	2	34
29=	**Jonathan David** *(Lille)*	16	2	32
29=	**Tim Kleindienst** *(Borussia M'gladbach)*	16	2	32
29=	**Ollie Watkins** *(Aston Villa)*	16	2	32
32=	**Mikael Ishak** *(Lech Poznan)*	21	1.5	31.5
32=	**Krzysztof Piatek** *(Istanbul Basaksehir)*	21	1.5	31.5
34=	**Matheus Cunha** *(Wolves)*	15	2	30
34=	**Ermedin Demirovic** *(Stuttgart)*	15	2	30
34=	**Hugo Ekitike** *(Eintracht Frankfurt)*	15	2	30
34=	**Alexandre Lacazette** *(Lyon)*	15	2	30
34=	**Ademola Lookman** *(Atalanta)*	15	2	30
34=	**Youssef En-Nesyri** *(Fenerbahce)*	20	1.5	30
34=	**Riccardo Orsolini** *(Bologna)*	15	2	30
34=	**Cole Palmer** *(Chelsea)*	15	2	30
34=	**Oihan Sancet** *(Athletic Club)*	15	2	30
43	**Thierno Barry** *(Basel/Villarreal)*	5/11	1.5/2	29.5
44=	**Samu Aghehowa** *(Porto)*	19	1.5	28.5
44=	**Simon Banza** *(Braga/Trabzonspor)*	19	1.5	28.5
44=	**Marko Livaja** *(Hajduk Split)*	19	1.5	28.5
44=	**Vangelis Pavlidis** *(Benfica)*	19	1.5	28.5
44=	**Ali Sowe** *(Caykur Rizespor)*	19	1.5	28.5

Serie A top scorer...Retegui

Ligue 1 Golden Boot winner... Dembele

The Golden Shoe is administered, computed and formulated by the European Sports Media group: *A Bola* (Portugal), *ElfVoetbal* (Netherlands), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *GoalNews/Sentragoal* (Greece), *Guerin Sportivo* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *SoFoot* (France), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *World Soccer* (England). **Affiliated members:** *Kick Off* (South Africa), *Titan Sport* (China), *Netease* (China), *SportalKorea* (South Korea).

"Despite genuine and vocal support across the football world, the ruling did not fall in our favour. We are heartbroken by the outcome ...Nevertheless, we accept responsibility. And we're sorry"

Irish club Drogheda react to being expelled from the 2025-26 Conference League due to UEFA's multi-club ownership rules

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

12
Serie A clubs that will begin the 2025-26 season with a new coach: Inter, Atalanta, Roma, Lazio, Milan, Fiorentina, Lecce, Parma, Torino and Cagliari, as well as newly promoted Pisa and Cremonese.

42
Age of Cristiano Ronaldo at the expiration of his latest contract after he signed a new deal with Saudi side Al Nassr until 2027.

11
Goals scored by Andy Carroll in 21 games for Bordeaux after the ex-England and Liverpool striker left the French fourth-tier club.

2
Stints in charge of Sao Paulo for Hernan Crespo, who was re-hired by the Brazilian outfit in June. In 2021, he guided them to the Sao Paulo state championship.

£29.8m
The new record fee received by a Greek club – beating the previous record of £16.6m – after Brighton signed 18-year-old Charalampos Kostoulas from Olympiacos.

Greece's most expensive-ever export...young striker Kostoulas

27
Years that foreign goalkeepers will have been banned from playing in South Korea, with the country set to lift the ban from 2026. The rule was originally implemented in 1999 to develop homegrown keepers.

World-Cup bound...Australia celebrate qualifying for North America 2026

10
Teams that have qualified for next summer's World Cup after June's international break *(see page 51)*.

24
Years since Real Oviedo were in La Liga, before 40-year-old Santi Cazorla helped inspire them to their top-flight return via the Segunda Division play-offs.

21
Goals scored in two Germany games at the Under-19 Euros. In the group stage, they led England 5-1 before being pegged back to draw 5-5, while in an astonishing semi-final they lost 6-5 to Spain with three goals scored in stoppage time and five in extra-time.

7
Number of French titles won by Lyon, who have been demoted to Ligue 2 because of the poor state of their finances. The club say they plan to appeal the decision, labelling it "incomprehensible".

2031
Year that Alejandro Dominguez will serve as CONMEBOL president until after the incumbent won the confederation's latest election.

8,513
Miles that Milan could travel for a "home" game against local rivals Como if Serie A gives the go-ahead for the first-ever European league match to be played abroad.

34
England caps won by Southampton's Adam Lallana, who retired aged 37.

€1.5m
Reported stake purchased by Marco Verratti in his former club Pescara. The ex-Italy midfielder is set to buy a 40 per cent stake in the recently-promoted Serie B club.

43%
Stake of Crystal Palace sold by John Textor to New York Jets owner Woody Johnson in a "legally binding contract" in order to help the club comply with multi-club ownership rules ahead of UEFA's 2025-26 Europa League campaign.

Palace exit... John Textor

65
Minutes played in Salernitana and Sampdoria's Serie B relegation play-off before its abandonment due to crowd trouble. Samp were winning 2-0 when home fans began throwing seats onto the pitch. They were later awarded a 3-0 victory and therefore spared a first-ever relegation to the third tier.

2
Appearances goalkeeper Scott Carson made for Manchester City in six years, before departing the club with 11 major honours.

40
Age that James Milner will turn next season. The midfielder signed a one-year extension at Brighton.

One more year ...James Milner

218
Appearances John Heitinga made for Ajax as a player, before leaving Liverpool's coaching staff to become the Dutch club's head coach in the wake of Francesco Farioli's exit.

31
Years since a player moved directly from Espanyol to rivals Barcelona, before goalkeeper Joan Garcia joined Barca in a €25m deal.

8
Number of consecutive foreign managers Shakhtar Donetsk have appointed – dating back to 2004 – after they hired former Turkey international Arda Turan as coach.

Liverpool's record signing...Reds new boy Florian Wirtz

FROM WUNDERKIND TO ONE OF A KIND

Liverpool have broken the bank to sign Florian Wirtz – and with good reason

Words: Nick Bidwell

Liverpool's stunning purchase of Germany attacking midfielder Florian Wirtz from Bayer Leverkusen, for a fee that could reach £116 million including performance-related add-ons, is a huge flashing neon sign of dynasty-building intent.

It is not just the Reds' most expensive signing, it is also a British transfer record. The Premier League champions would not have broken the bank for him if they merely wanted a steady as she goes approach, to tinker at the edges. Wirtz's arrival at Anfield signals a marked upgrade in ambition, implicitly targeting the club's first successful English title defence since 1983-84, not to mention a sustained Champions League run.

For the majority of their 15 years as Liverpool's owners, the Boston-based Fenway Sports Group (FSG) have tended to be parsimonious in recruitment matters. There have been exceptions – parting way with close to £60 million for Luis Suarez and Andy Carroll in their first-ever transfer window in January 2011, and the key captures of Virgil van Dijk for £75m in January 2018 and Alisson for £65m the following summer. But overall, only three times under FSG had the club spent over £100m in a transfer window; the unwillingness to splurge perfectly illustrated last summer when the sole signing was £10 million Italy winger Federico Chiesa from Juventus.

Twelve months on, the Anfield paymasters have suddenly embraced lavish outlay, prepared to do whatever it took to see off Manchester City and Bayern Munich in the race for the German *wunderkind's* signature.

This gargantuan deal for Wirtz is plainly not without its risks. Aged just 22, he is still a young man and undoubtedly faces a culture shock in England, an alien football, social and linguistic environment to adjust to. All his life, he has lived in his native Rhineland, learning his chops as a schoolboy at Grun-Weiss Brauweiler, the outfit his father Hans ran, before

moving to the Cologne academy and then onto Leverkusen in 2020. Say goodbye to the comfort zone.

The Wirtz hype machine is already cranking up around the Premier League circuit and that can only mean excessive pressure. Rather than being given the time to settle in at his own pace, he will be expected to deliver instantly. There's also the question of how team chemistry at Anfield will be affected. How quickly will Wirtz establish a good working relationship with his team-mates?

Inevitably, cynics and pessimists prefer to deal in the minutiae of the worst-case scenario. A much more likely outcome is that Wirtz, one of the brightest talents in all of Europe, turns out to be a roaring success at Anfield. Always a class apart in terms of natural ability and instincts, Wirtz was deemed a prodigy even before making his Leverkusen debut away to Werder Bremen in May 2020 at the age of 17. Scoring against Bayern Munich three weeks later, cheekily netting with a left-footed curler, to become the Bundesliga's then-youngest goalscorer cranked up the hype even further. But he duly justified it in the ensuing years, most emphatically when inspiring Leverkusen to their first Bundesliga title in 2023-24, a campaign in which they remained undefeated.

In that remarkable season – in which Leverkusen also claimed the German Cup and were Europa League runners-up – the collectively outstanding *Werkself* had five-star quality all over the pitch. But more than any other player it was young Wirtz who turned heads, brutally rampant with his line-breaking dribbling, brilliant approach play (particularly slick one-twos), through-ball flair, boundless energy and coolness as a finisher.

Mention of his statistical contribution – 11 league goals and 12 assists – does not quite convey the attacking load he carried throughout this unforgettable period. Either on the left side or more centrally, he was a bewitching, untenable force, fully deserving of the German Player of the Season award.

A wondergoal he scored in a 2-1 home win over Freiburg in October 2023 perfectly encapsulated his dazzling skills: the dancing feet which left defender after defender lunging at thin air, the sinuous twists and drag-backs as he manoeuvred himself into a shooting position and the *coup de grace*, a curling effort inside the far post. A pure work of art. Little wonder it was voted Goal of the Year for 2023. "I won't be accusing my players of anything in this case," sighed Freiburg coach Christian Streich. "You can't defend against Wirtz. That was world class."

Title hero...Wirtz was the star of Leverkusen's undefeated title-winning season

Goal of the Year... Wirtz curls home v Freiburg in 2023

Older German fans will remember Eintracht Frankfurt's Nigerian virtuoso Jay-Jay Okocha winning the same award for a similarly flamboyant slalom and finish against Karlsruhe back in 1993.

Not that Wirtz, capped 31 times for Germany, is only about extravagant ball skills, speed, incisive passing and end product. Team spirit, energy, enthusiasm and work ethic form part of his package too and he certainly doesn't pay lip service to pressing responsibilities, winning back possession no fewer than 71 times in the final-third last season, including 39 high turnovers.

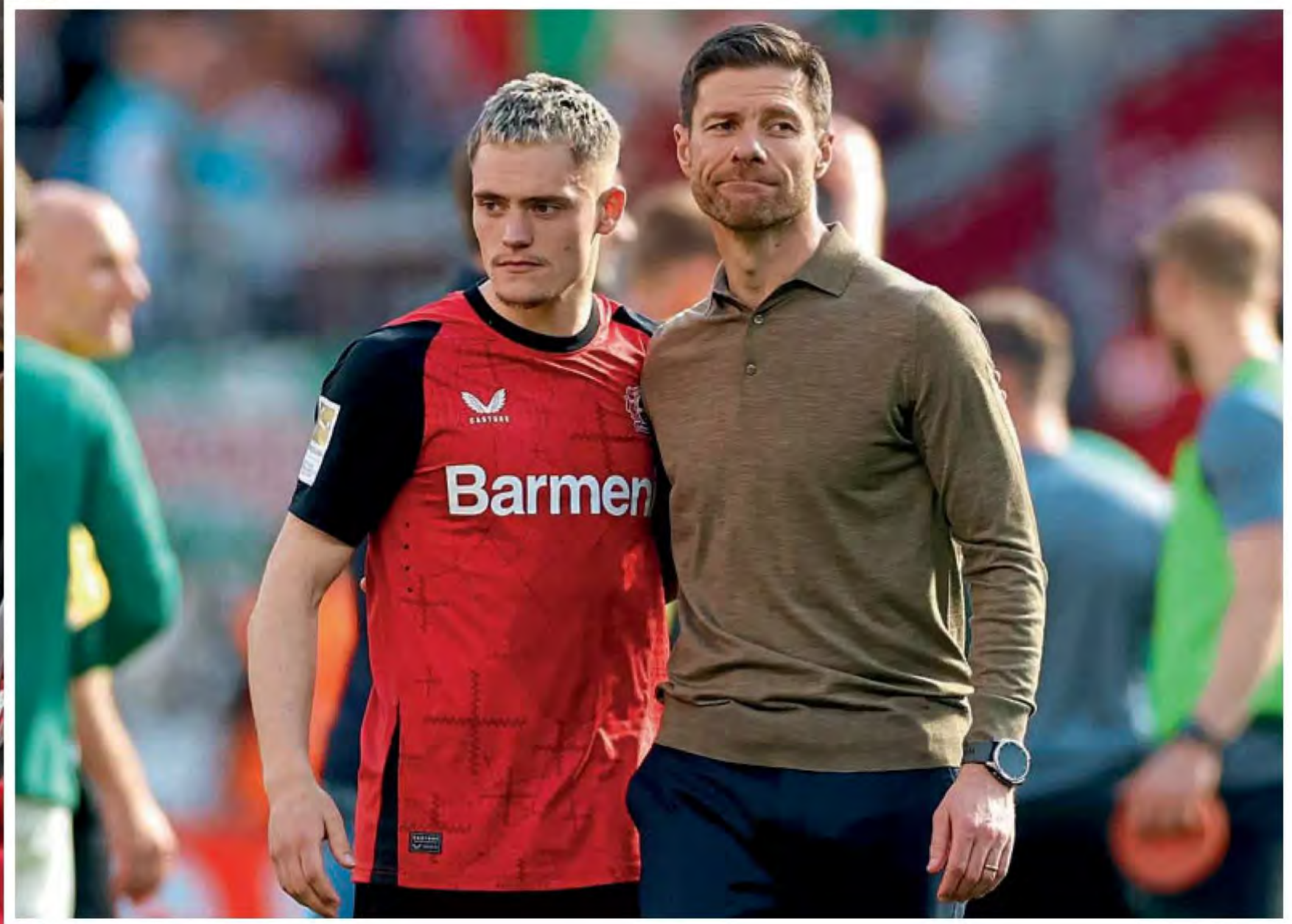
Wiry yet surprisingly sturdy, he grafts and fights with a true blue-collar mentality – so much so that last season, he ended up second in the Bundesliga rankings for duels won, his total of 383 only bettered by indomitable Bochum defensive midfielder Ibrahima Sissoko.

"Frequently it's his technique and dribbling which are highlighted," Leverkusen managing director of sport Simon Rolfes told *Bild* newspaper late last year. "But he also has a very intensive way of playing. He continues to add robustness to his game. I recently saw a photo of him on the day he signed his first contract with us [aged 16]. He's now much more muscled. He has a completely different body. He's worked hard for that. He's in position to deal with any sort of physical challenge. He doesn't shy away."

Don't expect Wirtz to struggle with the unforgiving physicality of the Premier League. He's had his share of rough treatment in the Bundesliga.

Wirtz is gritty and stoic, qualities he showed in abundance after tearing cruciate ligaments in his left knee in a Bundesliga game against old club Cologne in March 2022. A nightmarish injury for every professional but even more a blow for an 18-year-old, who was performing with such promise in the top flight that season, scoring seven goals and providing ten assists – and who, six months previously, had made his senior international debut as a

> "You can't defend against Wirtz. That was world class"
>
> **Former Freiburg coach Christian Streich after seeing Wirtz score against his team**



Key influence...Xabi Alonso helped get the best out of Wirtz

substitute in a World Cup qualifier against Liechtenstein.

The teenager, highly rated by the then-*Bundestrainer* Hansi Flick, almost certainly would have gone to Qatar 2022. But instead had to endure ten months looking in from the outside, only returning to the first-team fray in January 2023.

To his immense credit, he took the whole frustrating process in his stride. No sulking, bitterness or self-pity. Just total concentration on his recovery work – so much so that when he did eventually play again, he was in even better shape. More chiselled, far more resilient.

Wirtz, who during his enforced pause extended his contract with Leverkusen until 2027, soon would be back in the swing of things, turning on the style in the second half of the 2022-23 campaign. In his first start since his injury, he cleverly set up a goal for Adam Hlozek in a 2-0 victory over Bochum and looked especially sharp creatively, much to the fore as Leverkusen booked a Europa League ticket via a sixth-place finish.

"What happened with my [cruciate ligament] injury, no longer is relevant," declared Wirtz in an interview with *Kicker* magazine in May 2023. "Thoughts of it don't enter my head. As soon as I trained with the first team again, it felt good. I've already played in lots of top-level games against teams known for their aggression. I've put it behind me. I didn't have any sort of mental block."

Heartbreak...Wirtz is stretchered off with a knee injury in March 2022

This was the moment the stars began to spectacularly align for the BayArena club. The reappearance of a fit and firing Wirtz allied perfectly with the squad's embrace of the commandments issued by then-coach Xabi Alonso: the more structured defensive shape, possession-based approach, dynamism in transitions and relentlessness mindset.

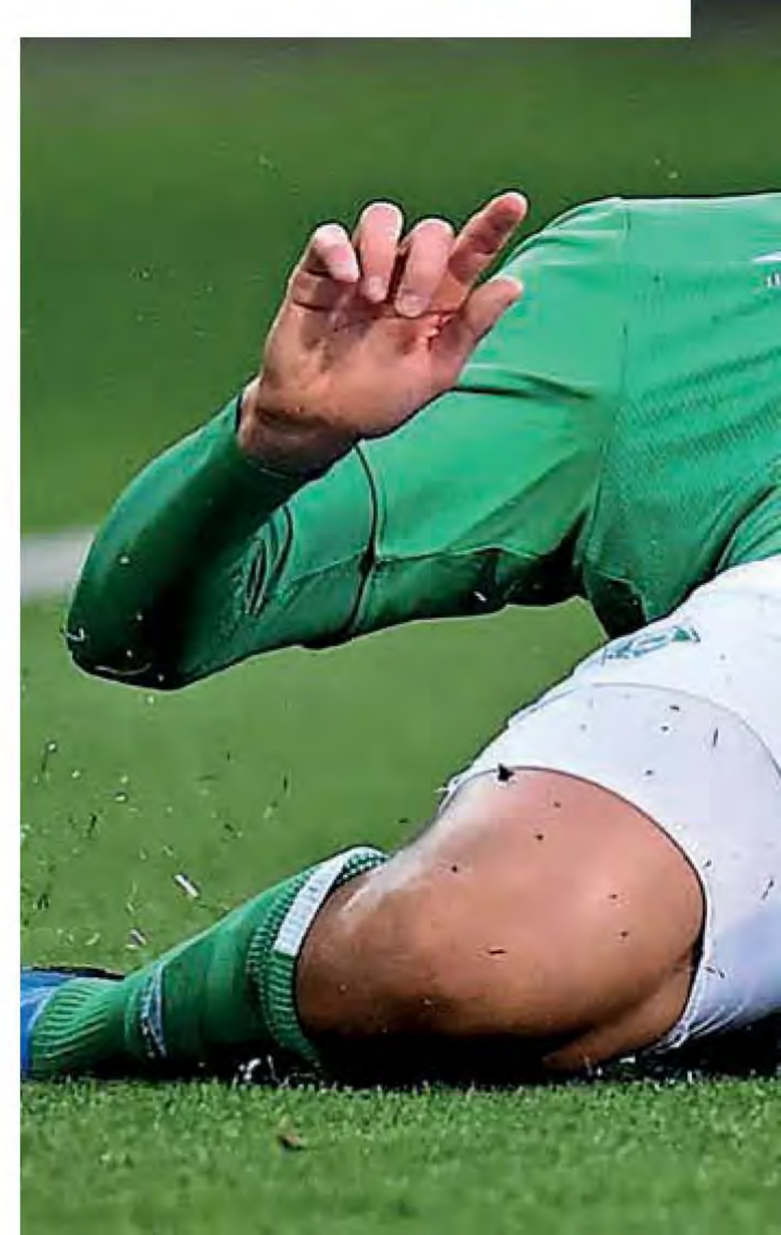
> "Why is Messi so good? Because he knows how and when to play simple...Florian can do that. That's what makes him so special"
>
> **Former Bayer Leverkusen head coach Xabi Alonso**

Well aware that Wirtz, the team's most skilful and inventive operative, needed less framework and more freedom, Alonso wisely made him a special case in his system. No other Leverkusen player had that licence to roam, wide or as a number ten, to pose a deep threat or drop deeper. In their first few first few months working together, Alonso used him in a variety of roles: as an attacking midfielder, on the right wing and even as a central striker in prestige fixtures versus Bayern and Borussia Dortmund.

Alonso knew an ace card when he saw one. "Florian is a gift for me as a trainer," he said in an interview in 2023 with *Suddeutsche Zeitung*. "He's very important. He's a player who is different. Why is Messi so good? Because he knows how and when to play simple. It's not always about making the most brilliant move, but the best and the smartest. Florian can do that. That's what makes him so special."

Alonso is not the only person to have made comparisons between the Argentina legend and Wirtz. Last season, then-Cologne coach Gerhard Struber referred to the playmaker as "the German Messi from Cologne."

Comeback...Wirtz on his first start since his ACL against Bochum in January 2023



Bundesliga debut... Wirtz made his first-team debut during the COVID season

Not that his old club would appreciate their name being attached to Wirtz. While he might be venerated by kids and adults alike the length and breadth of Germany, Wirtz does not enjoy the same unbridled popularity amongst supporters of Cologne, who will probably never forgive him for controversially leaving them for local rivals Leverkusen in January 2020.

With the Cologne academy for the best part of a decade, Wirtz was the Billy Goats' great hope for a brighter tomorrow, a youngster with rare skills and potential, who apparently lived for the club's famous white-and-red colours and was the cornerstone of the club's conquest of the German Under-17 title in 2018-19.

However, all was to change with the bombshell announcement on the last day of January 2020 that Wirtz, still only 16 at the time, would be moving with immediate effect to Leverkusen. The fee? A mere €300,000.

Cologne screamed long and loud that Leverkusen were the villains of the piece. Since 2001, the Rhineland's top three clubs – Leverkusen, Cologne and Borussia Monchengladbach – had come to a gentleman's agreement not to poach another team's academy prospects. According to Cologne, their neighbours had smashed the convention to smithereens.

Former Cologne coach Steffen Baumgart summed up the club's festering fury in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* the following year: "He [Wirtz] spent a long time in our performance centre for youngsters and a good job was done of developing him. The understanding between Cologne, Leverkusen and Monchengladbach was thrown out. That shows you what kind of business we're in. One has to say that a lot of money has flowed over there [to Leverkusen]. We're simply not able to keep up. After all, that club is owned by a business. Cologne [a fan-owned club] and Leverkusen operate under different conditions and that has a big influence on these things."

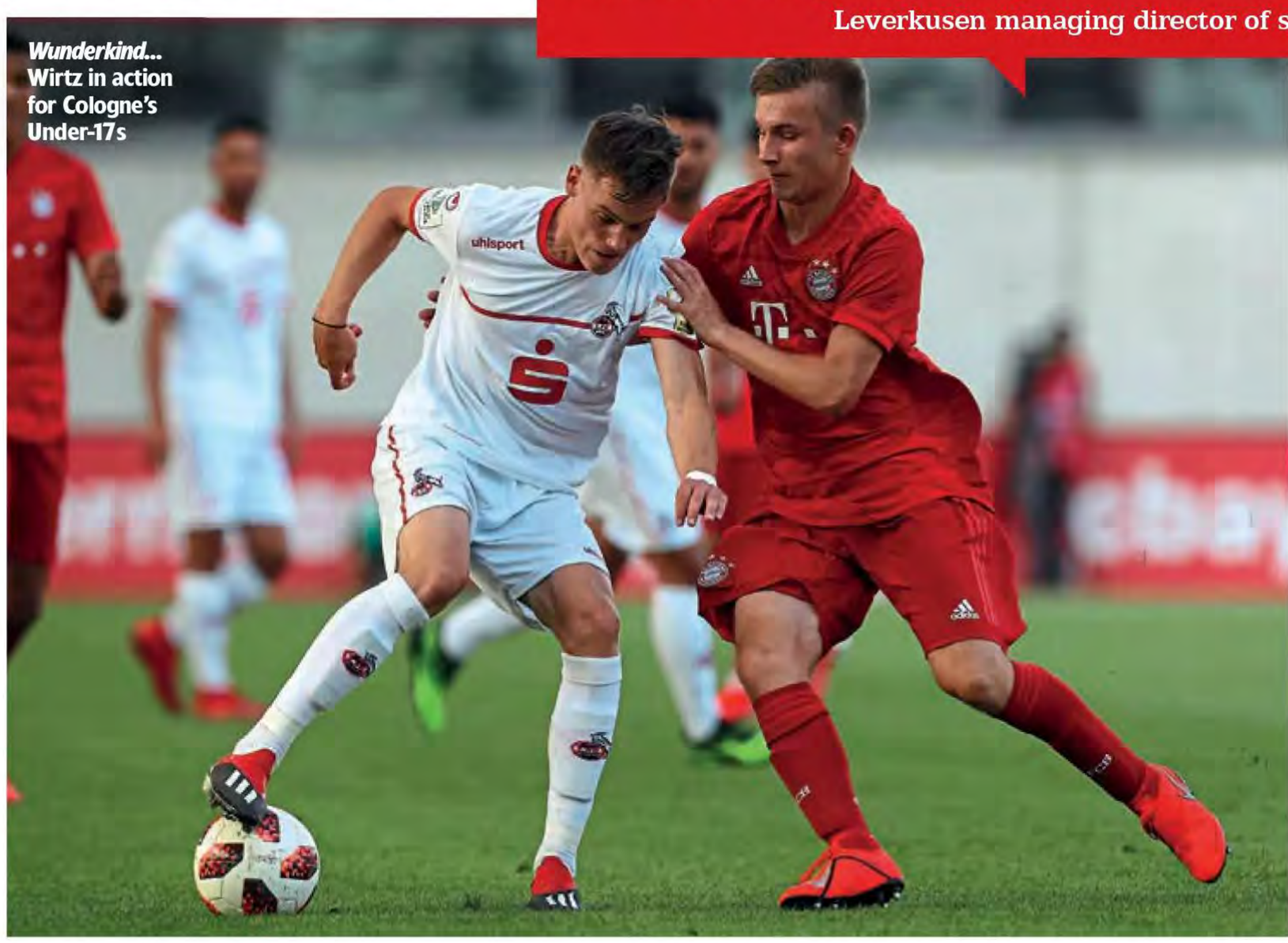
Anfield audition...he faced Liverpool in last season's Champions League group phase

As far as Leverkusen were concerned, no agreement had been violated. Their argument was that they had signed a first-team player not an academy prospect. "It would have been grossly negligent of us not to enter negotiations," then-Leverkusen managing director Rudi Voller told *Kicker*.

"I'd known Wirtz since he was 14," Simon Rolfes revealed on the *SPOX* website. "As his contract [with Cologne] was expiring, the possibility of signing him arose and so we tried to get him. I knew that many other clubs were interested. Our thinking was that before he went anywhere else, we'd try to get him to come here and stay close to home."

Wirtz says that he plumped for Leverkusen because of "better career prospects" and soon would have them in the palm of his hand, needing just four eye-catching games with their Under-19 side before making his professional debut. In doing so, he replaced Kai Havertz as the club's youngest-ever player; now, he has replaced the versatile Arsenal forward as Leverkusen's record sale too. And there should be plenty more to come.

> "Frequently it's his technique and dribbling which are highlighted. But he also has a very intensive way of playing...He doesn't shy away"
>
> Leverkusen managing director of sport Simon Rolfes



***Wunderkind...* Wirtz in action for Cologne's Under-17s**

Florian Wirtz

BUNDESLIGA CREATORS

Last five seasons

Player/Club	Assists
Thomas **MULLER** *(Bayern Munich)*	57
Florian **WIRTZ** *(Bayer Leverkusen)*	44
Vincenzo **GRIFO** *(Freiburg)*	41
Julian **BRANDT** *(Borussia Dortmund)*	39
Leroy **SANE** *(Bayern Munich)*	39
Joshua **KIMMICH** *(Bayern Munich)*	39

EUROPA LEAGUE YOUNG PLAYER OF THE SEASON

2022-23 **FLORIAN WIRTZ** *(Leverkusen)*

2023-24 **FLORIAN WIRTZ** *(Leverkusen)*

2024-25 **RAYAN CHERKI** *(Lyon)*

YOUNGEST BUNDESLIGA GOALSCORERS

December 2020
YOUSSOUFA MOUKOKO
Union Berlin v ***Dortmund***
16 years and 28 days

June 2020
FLORIAN WIRTZ
Leverkusen *v Bayern*
17 years, 1 month and 3 days

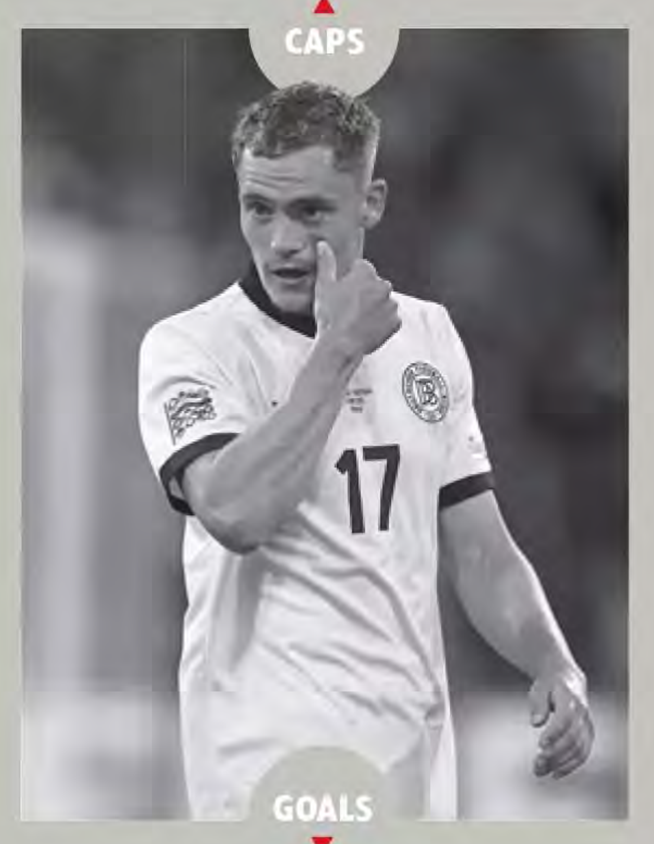
November 2005
NURI SAHIN
Nuremberg v ***Dortmund***
16 years, 2 months and 21 days

September 2022
MATHYS TEL
Bayern *v Stuttgart*
17 years, 4 months and 14 days

GERMANY

31

CAPS



GOALS

7

BRITISH TRANSFER RECORD PROGRESSION

£29.1m	**RIO FERDINAND** 2002 *(Leeds Utd to Manchester Utd)*
£30.8m	**ANDRIY SHEVCHENKO** 2006 *(Milan to Chelsea)*
£32.5m	**ROBINHO** 2008 *(Real Madrid to Manchester City)*
£80m	**CRISTIANO RONALDO** 2009 *(Manchester Utd to Real Madrid)*
£85.3m	**GARETH BALE** 2013 *(Tottenham to Real Madrid)*
£89m	**PAUL POGBA** 2016 *(Juventus to Manchester Utd)*
£105m	**PHILIPPE COUTINHO** 2018 *(Liverpool to Barcelona)*
£106.8m	**ENZO FERNANDEZ** 2023 *(Benfica to Chelsea)*
£115m	**MOISES CAICEDO** 2023 *(Brighton to Chelsea)*
£116m	**FLORIAN WIRTZ** 2025 *(Bayer Leverkusen to Liverpool)*

BUNDESLIGA Player of the Season

2019-20 **ROBERT LEWANDOWSKI** *(Bayern Munich)*

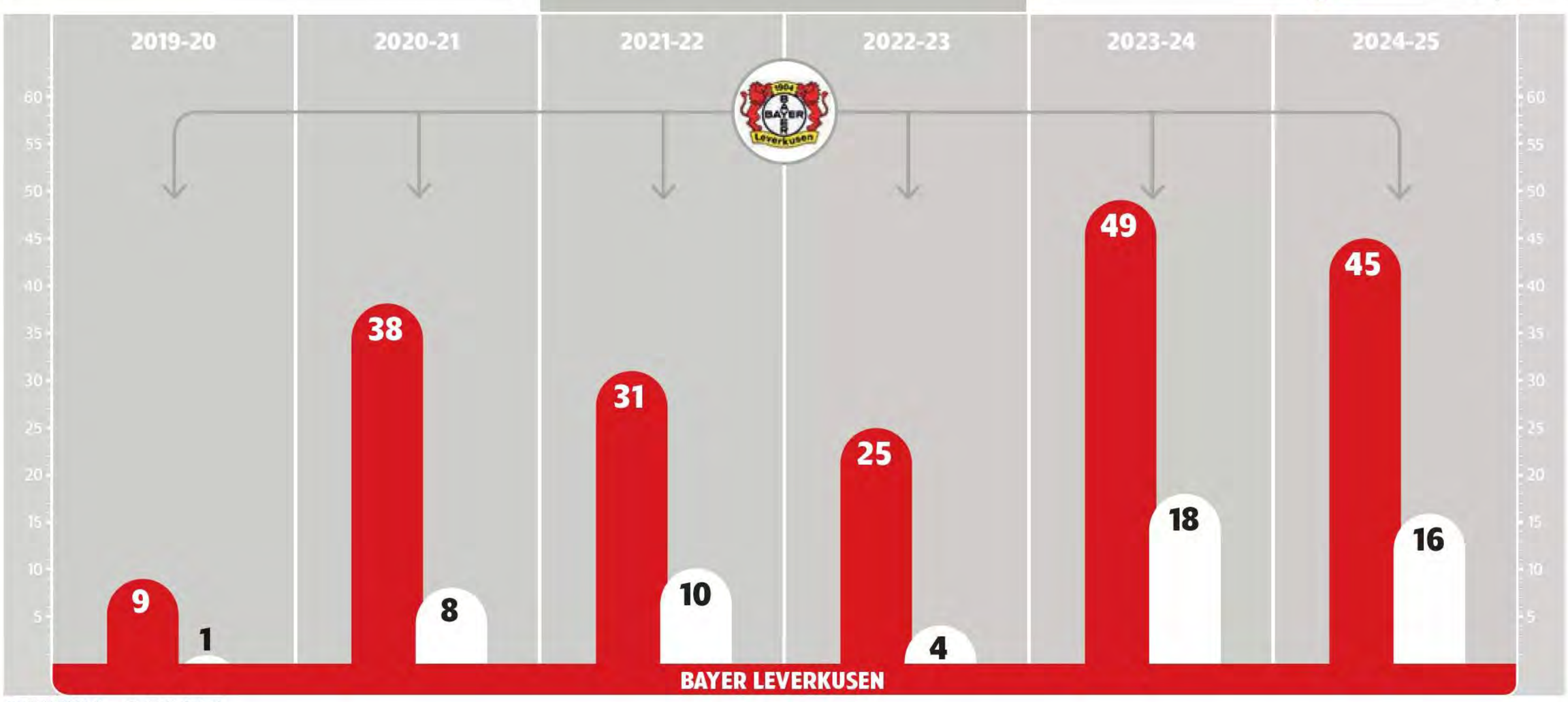
2020-21 **ERLING HAALAND** *(Dortmund)*

2021-22 **CHRISTOPHER NKUNKU** *(RB Leipzig)*

2022-23 **JUDE BELLINGHAM** *(Dortmund)*

2023-24 **FLORIAN WIRTZ** *(Leverkusen)*

2024-25 **HARRY KANE** *(Bayern Munich)*



eyewitness

Mark Gleeson reports

EGYPT

Building the Pyramids

How Egypt's footballing duopoly is being challenged

You would think that with a name like Pyramids, the new African champions have been around forever. But apart from their name, everything about the Egyptian club is new.

Manufactured, in fact, if the sentiment of Cairo's taxi drivers is anything to go by, dismissing them with a haughty disdain. That is because almost every citizen of Cairo is either an *Ahlawy* or *Zamalkawy* – there are few who fall between the cracks. Either you support Al Ahly, as a substantial number of the 20 million-plus crammed into the city do, or their long-standing rivals Zamalek, who had a more aristocratic lure but have lost a lot of lustre since the reign of their eccentric former president Mortada Mansour.

Cairo has other clubs, among them Al Mokawloon ("Arab Contractors" in English) who won the old-style African Cup Winners' Cup three times in the 1980s and 1990s and forged the career of a young Mohamed Salah. But there is a company team, and even the employees are obliged to show support from the stands, secretly opting for either Ahly or Zamalek.

This is the landscape into which Pyramids have imposed themselves, with their triumph in this year's African Champions League establishing strong credentials.

But while there is now firmly a trio of top clubs in Egypt, with Pyramids shattering the long-standing Cairo duopoly, they are a long way off establishing a foothold in the affection of Egypt's rabid soccer lovers. This is something they want to change as quickly as possible.

The absence of any real support was all too obvious as they navigated their way through only their second-ever Champions League campaign. But a near-full house to support them for the second leg of the final against South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns – albeit with free tickets and transport – holds out hope that they might be able to forge a foothold for themselves.

"This is a miracle because we are a club...I wouldn't say strange...but different," said their coach Krunoslav Jurcic in the wake of Champions League success.

"We are a very specific club. We have good players, we have good support and excellent staff here in Egypt, but we don't have the tradition of the older clubs. This is very difficult because for tradition you need time. We don't have time, but in this short time, we have done excellent things."

It would all have been a pipe dream back in 2018 when billionaire Saudi investor Turki Al Sheikh bought the Al Assiouty Sport club, based in Asyut in Upper Egypt. The club was first formed in 2008 and, when Al Sheikh, head of the Saudi General Sports Authority, took over, they were in the Egyptian Premier League.

Al Sheikh had been involved with Al Ahly, invited onto their board as an honorary member because of his considerable wealth and influence, but not given much influence in the running of club affairs as he envisaged. Subsequently, Al Sheikh left after only five months. Within two weeks, he bought Al Assiouty and began the bid to create another rival to challenge Al Ahly's dominance of the Egyptian – and continental – game.

Al Assiouty became Pyramids, with plenty of immediate ▸

Challenging the status quo...Pyramids have attempted to upset the Al Ahly-Zamalek duopoly

investment including an accompanying television channel to match those run by Ahly and Zamalek.

They moved to New Cairo, home to several gated communities, private universities, malls, international schools and corporate headquarters, which has been positioned as a hub for Cairo's upper and elite classes. It looks like a giant construction site as you traverse down a smart triple highway into the area, southeast from Cairo's city centre.

A deal with the Egyptian military to use the facilities of the Air Defence regiment was also signed, giving them immediate access to top facilities.

Reports at the time said the initial investment in the club was around €33 million, much of it on players (initially four from Brazil) and coaches as a new team was bought. Brazilian Alberto Valentim was the first coach but only lasted three games. Ricardo La Volpe from Argentina was next but the former Mexico boss left after three months as Al Sheikh ruffled feathers in the first season.

Within 12 months, Al Sheikh had sold the club to Emirati businessman Salem Al Shamsi and gone to buy Almeria in Spain instead, but not before running a controversial marketing campaign. In it, fans of Al Ahly and Zamalek were encouraged to "change your principles, support Pyramids." Their TV channel won the rights to several Egyptian Premier League games and even had John Terry appear as a pundit as Pyramids played their inaugural league match.

Passionate coach ...Pyramids boss Krunoslav Jurcic

On the field there was no denying they were a sudden force and despite five coaches in their first season (Ramon Diaz of Argentina another among them) they still managed to finish third in their first campaign, a feat repeated in 2020 and 2021.

In the 2021-22 season they interrupted the dominance of the big two by finishing runners-up to Zamalek in the title race, with Al Ahly in third, and have finished second in the three seasons since.

Frenchman Sebastien Desabre, now coach of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, brought some stability, and there was even more under Ante Cacic from Croatia and then Argentine Rodolfo Arruabarrena.

Finishing third in their first season meant they competed in the African Confederation Cup the next campaign and got all the way to the final, losing to Renaissance Berkane. They were semi-finalists the next season and made it to the last eight in 2022 and 2023.

Pyramids have bought plenty of top talent over the last seven seasons en route to continental glory, as Al Shamsi

African champions ...Pyramids players celebrate with the CAF Champions League trophy

Climbing up... Pyramids failed to leapfrog Al Ahly in the Egyptian Premier League

has kept up the investment. But they are now also bringing some of their own homegrown talent through the system, with an academy that looks to match the two Cairo giants' long-successful youth policy.

Nevertheless, most of the squad are still bought in, including from around Africa and Latin America.

This past season, Fiston Mayele from DR Congo was top scorer in the Champions League while Blati Toure from Burkina Faso was a midfield metronome. Both are over 30 years old and likely to stay as their chances of a move to Europe are now gone.

So too Walid El Karti, who got the all-important away goal in the first leg of the Champions League final, and his Moroccan counterpart Mohamed Chibi.

Ramadan Sobhi, who had a brief stint in the Premier League at Stoke City and Huddersfield Town, is indicative of the discards given a second lease of life at Pyramids. At one point, he was going to be Egyptian football's big talent, emerging around the same time as Salah. But an inconsistency that infuriates coaches saw Sobhi's stock slip. He remains a peripheral pick for the national team and was mainly used as an impact player in Pyramids' historic Champions League run.

Often he was anonymous, but he did demonstrate his match-winning ability when he came on against Orlando Pirates in the second leg of their semi-final. With his side 2-1 down at home, Sobhi literally ran onto the field to get his head onto a driving cross, bulleting the ball home from just inside the penalty box for the equaliser before Pyramids went on to win 3-2.

Mohamed Hamdy has established himself as Egypt's first-choice left-back, and midfielder Mohanad Lasheen is another regular in the national squad. It all makes for an impressive squad.

This past season, Pyramids lost out to Ahly in the title race in controversial circumstances and were beaten in the Egypt Cup final (more on page 84), but there is a feeling they could be on the cusp of a domestic breakthrough.

"When I was offered this job, I didn't have a lot of information about African football, about Egyptian football, but when we started with the team, we played excellent football," says Jurcic. "We had a long run of winning matches in a row, but even then, this was not enough to be champions here. It was in that moment that I understood that Egyptian football has specific dynamics, and if we wanted to do something special, we had to lift up the level.

"This year, we were very close. There were things that went against us, but you know that Al Ahly are the best club in Africa, they are very good, they are very strong, and it's very difficult to compete against a club like Al Ahly. But we put all our energy into trying to beat them. I think that we can be competitive in the future with all the best teams in Egypt."

> "I think that we can be competitive in the future with all the best teams in Egypt"
>
> Pyramids head coach Krunoslav Jurcic

Star forwards... Ramadan Sobhi and Fiston Mayele

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PRICE CAPS

Vancouver Whitecaps are continental finalists and flying high in MLS – and they are up for sale

Words: Danny Lewis

To say that little was expected of Vancouver Whitecaps before this season started would be an understatement. In February, when MLS's nine-person panel of experts submitted their annual predictions for the 2025 campaign, only one expected the Caps to place higher than tenth in the Western Conference, one had them finishing last and another two predicted a place in the bottom three.

In their defence, the predictors were trying to guess the fortunes of a club whose future both on and off the pitch had been cast into doubt. The Whitecaps had parted ways with head coach Vanni Sartini, who had qualified for the MLS Cup play-offs in three of his four attempts at the helm and won three consecutive Canadian Championships.

He was replaced by Jesper Sorensen, who had previously spent his entire managerial career in his native Denmark, which included leading the nation's Under-21 team and most recently being in charge of Brondby.

A matter of weeks after Sartini's departure, it was announced that the club was being put up for sale by owners Greg Kerfoot, Steve Luczo, Jeff Mallett and Steve Nash.

"The current ownership has built a solid foundation for Whitecaps FC – it is the right time for an owner with the platform, resources and ambition to enhance the club's ability to compete at the highest levels of MLS and steward the club in realising its significant potential," read the club's official statement.

There were even fears that the club could relocate, although it has been stated on various occasions that the only plan is for the Caps to stay in Vancouver.

On the pitch, the campaign started with an underwhelming 2-1 CONCACAF Champions Cup defeat to Deportivo Saprissa in Costa Rica, giving weight to the negative predictions. Yet the team quickly bounced back with a 4-1 thumping of Portland Timbers in MLS. New signing Jayden Nelson was involved in all four goals, with the Canadian international returning to his home country after a couple of seasons in Norway with Rosenborg.

"There is no memory in football – it's all about what you do in the next game," he said afterwards, outlining the team's mentality. "We're a great group of guys, really close, and we fight for each other."

A 2-0 win in the second leg against Saprissa secured passage into the last 16 of the Champions Cup, setting the tone for what was to follow – not least in Brian White scoring both goals with a clinical touch that has rarely deserted him all season.

That and the win over the Timbers started a 23-match run in which the Caps lost just once. Even beyond the results, Sorensen setting his side up in a way that allows them to play captivating football will have eased any potential doubts that had arisen from Sartini's departure.

That sole defeat, a 3-1 reverse at home to Chicago Fire, came during the March international break when a number of players were called away. The packed nature of their schedule was outlined by their participation in the CONCACAF Champions Cup and Canadian Championship, meaning that they were left out of the Leagues Cup – MLS clubs may now only compete in two cup competitions – while they have also had to contend with absences, most notably Scottish playmaker Ryan Gauld being unavailable since March with a knee injury.

There have been some memorable performances in MLS, including a 5-1 win over Austin and a 3-2 comeback victory against Real Salt Lake. White was heavily involved in both, scoring four goals in the former and a brace in the latter. But the CONCACAF Champions Cup has provided some of their best moments.

The Canadian side went a goal down 25 minutes into the first leg of their last-16 tie against Monterrey, but Belal Halbouni headed home Gauld's free-kick to ensure they travelled to Mexico on level terms.

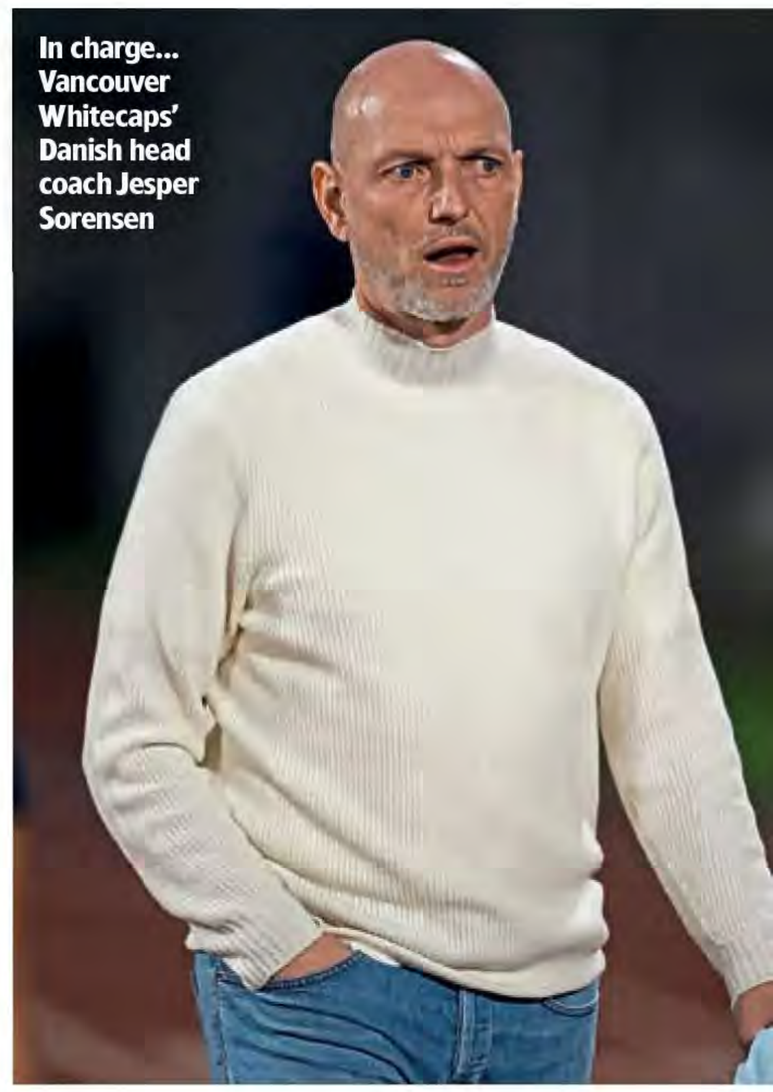
Even after finding themselves behind again after just four minutes at the Estadio Corona, the Whitecaps responded with a venomous Edier Ocampo strike and a cool White finish to ensure they went through – even if Sergio Ramos' controversially awarded penalty meant their progression came via the away goals rule.

In the first leg against Pumas UNAM, the roles were reversed as Vancouver went ahead thanks to a scrappy goal before conceding a late equaliser.

The 1-1 draw was followed by another 2-2 scoreline in Mexico – and plenty of late drama. With the tie on a knife edge at 1-1 heading into the 88th minute, the Estadio Olimpico Universitario erupted when Ignacio Pussetto gave Pumas the lead, but the home supporters' cheers turned to jeers in the third minute of added time. Tristan Blackmon reached Ocampo's looping pass and turned it into the roof of the net before being mobbed by his team-mates, as the

US call-up... midfielder Sebastian Berhalter

Heavy defeat... Caps players Sam Adekugbe and Andres Cubas during the final thrashing by Cruz Azul



In charge... Vancouver Whitecaps' Danish head coach Jesper Sorensen

Leading the line... Brian White has been in goalscoring form

away goals rule and Vancouver's resolve once again saw them through.

That goal set up a mouth-watering all-MLS semi-final against Inter Miami. Lionel Messi, Luis Suarez and the rest were swept aside by the Caps, with White brilliantly heading in the opener at BC Place before his US compatriot Sebastian Berhalter provided a buffer with five minutes left on the clock.

Any nerves that might have kicked in after Jordi Alba's early goal at Chase Stadium in the second leg were soon diminished as Berhalter made the difference once again. The midfielder assisted White to equalise, teed up Pedro Vite for another, then completed a dream evening by scoring the third goal himself.

The victory ensured that Vancouver became the third Canadian club to qualify for a CONCACAF Champions Cup final after Montreal Impact (as they were known at the time) in 2015 and Toronto FC in 2018.

Berhalter is the encapsulation of the team's surprising rise. The son of former USMNT head coach Gregg, he received his first senior international call-up in June, joining White in the squad after the striker had scored his first-ever international goal earlier in the year. Both players were also called up to Mauricio Pochettino's Gold Cup squad.

The locals will also be able to proudly watch academy graduate Ali Ahmed, who has become an increasingly prominent figure in Jesse Marsch's Canada squad. However, the 24-year-old's Gold Cup campaign sadly ended early after he suffered an ankle injury in the group stage game against Curacao.

The positivity of the Whitecaps' CONCACAF Champions Cup, however, came to a shattering end in the final. A shadow of the side that had impressed so much in the earlier rounds, they went down 5-0 to Mexican side Cruz Azul.

Already missing Berhalter through suspension after he picked up yellow cards in both semi-finals, conditions were also against them. CONCACAF rules state that, rather than playing the final in a neutral venue, the team with the superior record from the last 16 onwards host the match. As if the vociferous home support wasn't difficult enough to contend with, a club statement later outlined that: "Following the team's return from Mexico, a significant number of Whitecaps FC players and staff reported gastrointestinal symptoms."

> "We're a great group of guys, really close, and we fight for each other"
> Vancouver Whitecaps winger Jayden Nelson

Marsch alleged foul play to reporters, saying: "This is the second year in a row that CONCACAF and the powers that be have allowed an MLS team to go down to Mexico for a big final and get poisoned," although the Whitecaps' sporting director Alex Schuster poured water on those claims.

"So far our analysis leads to the assumption that it [the infection] happened after the game, somewhere on the way back," he said.

Whatever the cause, Sorensen's side quickly bounced back, beating Seattle Sounders 3-0 a week later. It was achieved with several players on international duty once again and fittingly, considering their knack for finding a way through difficult tests, it was 19-year-old Jeevan Badwal who opened the scoring with his first-ever senior goal in just his second MLS start.

Vancouver's mixture of resilience and quality meant they sat top of the Western Conference in mid-June, with Eastern Conference side Philadelphia Union having two more points than them after playing an extra match. Their highest-ever previous finish in the Western Conference was in 2015 when they came second, while they have never made it past the Conference semi-final in the play-offs, so there are plenty of opportunities for the Caps to make more history in 2025.

It all adds up to a compelling package for any investors interested in purchasing an MLS club. Since the club was put up for sale there has been little in the way of updates about who the next owners will be – other than rumours that Vancouver native and Wrexham owner Ryan Reynolds could be interested.

In February, *Forbes* ranked the Whitecaps as the 27th most valuable MLS franchise out of 29 (newcomers San Diego were not included in the list) with the lowest revenue in the league and operating at a US$10 million deficit, meaning that it will require an investor with deep pockets and big ambitions to step in.

The team's timing, then, in putting in performances that have garnered international attention just a year before their BC Place stadium hosts World Cup fixtures, could not be more perfect.

FROM IRELAND TO ESPERANCE

Meet the Irishman playing for the biggest club in Tunisia

Words: Mark Lomas

When glancing through the Esperance team sheet, Ayman Ben Mohamed's name does not particularly stand out from the rest. Like many in the squad, the left-back is a Tunisia international with a Tunisian surname; nothing out of the ordinary. But it has not always been this way.

Born in London to an Irish mother and Tunisian father, Ben Mohamed's early days as a professional came in the League of Ireland with University College Dublin, Longford Town and Bohemians. Back then, Ben Mohamed's name was a source of intrigue when it appeared alongside more obviously Irish monikers like Byrne, Murphy and Kavanagh.

Still, it came as something of a surprise in 2016 when a 21-year-old Ben Mohamed made a move that no Ireland-based player has made before or since: he swapped Dublin for Tunis to join Esperance, one of Africa's biggest clubs.

"Things were going very well at Bohemians and I actually got my first call-up to the Tunisian national team while I was there, which came out of the blue," he explains. "I went over to Tunisia for a training camp and then when I came back to Ireland, I heard there were a few clubs interested in signing me. At that time, I was still trying to get something in England or Scotland, but my dad spoke with Esperance. He convinced me it would be a good move so I decided to take the chance."

Despite his heritage, it was a step into the unknown for Ben Mohamed.

"I was always aware of Tunisian football because of my father, but that was more following the national team. I'd come to Tunisia for the summers but I didn't really follow the football here too closely. It wasn't really something I thought about too much when I was younger. The way things have gone for me, playing in Tunisia, wasn't planned – but it's been something different, something interesting."

In recent years, Bohemians have become one of the best-supported clubs in Ireland, but when Ben Mohamed was there, their average attendance was barely four figures. To go from that to the most successful club in Tunisia, then, was a huge step up.

"It was a massive change and a bit of a shock, to be honest," he admits. "It is a huge club with a massive fanbase of very, very passionate fans who always create an amazing atmosphere.

"I remember the first game I ever went to, just to watch, was the Tunisian Cup final. It was a derby against our

Club World Cup... Ben Mohamed during a training session at this summer's tournament

International recognition...Ben Mohamed in action against Al Ain at the 2018 Club World Cup

biggest rivals, Club Africain, and there were 60,000 in the stadium. It was crazy and definitely a big transition from playing in Ireland. We had great fans at Bohemians but it was a much smaller scale than Tunisia."

Inevitably, with great support comes great pressure.

"When things are going great, there is nothing better. But obviously when results don't go well – even when you draw against lesser opposition – it can be tricky to manage. But that's one of the reasons Esperance is such a successful club. The pressure and expectation to win is always there. It's a club that has so much history and is used to winning so they don't really settle for any less. You always have to be on your toes and ready to bounce back when results don't go your way.

"At times there is trouble with fan violence and the police, which is unfortunate. When we play our derby matches against Club Africain, only one club is allowed to have their fans. It is a bit of a shame as it would be a lot better if both sets of fans were able to come and the stadium was full."

In May, Esperance won the Tunisian championship for a record-extending 34th time – the fourth title of Ben Mohamed's career, and first since returning from a spell in Europe.

"Even though it's expected, it is still great," he says. "It has not been easy and I think this year is probably the tightest it

Rubbing shoulders ...Ben Mohamed challenges Sadio Mane at the 2019 AFCON

has ever been in the time I've been playing for Esperance. There were still five or six teams involved in the title race up until the last few weeks of the season. It was good to get over the line and lift the trophy again."

In total, the 30-year-old has now won nine major honours in Tunisia. The highlight came in 2018, when Esperance overcame Egyptian giants Al Ahly to win the CAF Champions League in front of 60,000 people.

"We lost the first leg 3-1 after a controversial penalty, so there was a lot of motivation for the return leg here in Tunis," he recalls. "We came out and won 3-0 in front of our fans. It was the club's 100-year anniversary too so it was really special.

"It was also a huge moment for me personally because in my first couple of years at Esperance, it took me a little while to settle in. But I kept fighting and was in the starting XI for the second leg. It was a great game to be a part of.

"There were thousands and thousands of fans on the street in Tunis and it was just a mad, amazing atmosphere. It was big, not just for the club but for the country. It had been seven years since a Tunisian team had last won the CAF Champions League."

That victory booked Esperance's ticket to the United Arab Emirates for the 2018 Club World Cup, where Ben Mohamed started in both of their matches.

"It was great to have that experience and to participate in a competition like that, but we were a bit disappointed with our performance, particularly getting knocked out in the first game [after a 3-0 loss to UAE side Al Ain]. I think we maybe underestimated the opposition, but we regrouped. In the second game we managed to beat Guadalajara on penalties, which made up for it a little bit. You don't always get to play in international competitions like that so we learned a lot."

Sadly for him, Ben Mohamed did not add to his two Club World Cup appearances at this summer's event in the US, staying on the bench as Esperance were eliminated in the group stage. Now, his focus is on getting back into the first team – both for club and country.

It was in October 2018 – more than two years after his first call-up – that Ben Mohamed made his Tunisia debut. It was, he says, "a dream come true" to pull on the red shirt of his father's country.

"I always wanted to play international football. When Tunisia called, I had no doubt it was what I wanted to do," he says. "Making my debut was massive, a very proud moment for me and my family – one of the best moments of my career."

Entering the international arena was another step up. Among the most memorable moments for Ben Mohamed, a boyhood Liverpool fan, were facing off against a couple of Anfield icons in Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane.

"They are definitely up there with the best players I have played against. There are times in the game when you get the feeling that they're not really doing much. Then out of nowhere, they just make the difference. I was playing directly against Salah and he was fairly quiet for most of the game but then he scored the winner. That's the type of players they are, they make a difference when it counts; it's what separates them from everyone else."

> "The first game I ever went to...there were 60,000 in the stadium. It was definitely a big transition from playing in Ireland"

It was against Mane's Senegal that Tunisia were beaten in the semi-finals of the 2019 AFCON, with Ben Mohamed in the starting line-up. He won the last of his 14 caps the following year, not long after moving to French club Le Havre. But having returned to Tunisia, he is determined to get back into the international fold.

"Over the last few years, I've had a lot of injuries and haven't had the opportunity to get back with the national team," he says. "But it is 100 per cent something I'll be aiming for and I hope I'll get the chance again to play for Tunisia at some stage."

It is almost ten years since he left Dublin as a 21-year-old with little experience of Tunisian football, or indeed any football outside Ireland. Now, he is a serial trophy winner, with experience in France (also spending a season at Guingamp) and Turkey (via a loan at Denizlispor in 2021), and one of the senior figures in the Esperance dressing room.

"As one of the more senior players in the group, your role changes as you gain more experience. I feel more responsibility to try and set a good example and to have a bigger role in the dressing room. But as a person, I don't feel as though I have changed. I've never been a very vocal person but I try to lead by example on the pitch with the way I play and the intensity."

As for the future, it is likely to be in North Africa.

"I really enjoy living here – the weather, the food, the culture. I think the place you were raised always feels most like home and for me that was Ireland, but Tunisia is definitely a second home for me."

Club World Cup...Ben Mohamed with team-mates ahead of Esperance's CWC clash against LAFC

SWITZERLAND'S GOLDEN GIRL

A heavy burden has been placed on the young shoulders of Switzerland Women's star player at this summer's European Championship – but Sydney Schertenleib has the talent to bear the load

Words: Rich Laverty

Sydney Schertenleib's middle name is Joy, which is what the whole of Switzerland will be hoping the nation's biggest female football talent brings during their historic home European Championship.

With 34-year-old Ramona Bachmann, the previous attacking icon of Swiss football, suffering a devastating ACL injury pre-tournament, more and more eyes will be on teenager Schertenleib, whose fledgling talent has already taken her to European giants Barcelona.

The tall, skilful and undoubtedly talented young star is a product of the FC Zurich academy, joining the club at the age of ten. She played with the boys until 15, when she graduated into the women's first team.

"I saw her for the first time when she was probably 11 or 12 years old," recalls Ivano Sicuro, then the talent manager at FC Zurich, who now works in a similar role for the Swiss Federation. "We worked with the top players who we believed could join the first team in the future. She was one of the first players we worked with in this programme. We tried to give her the same as the young boys to develop the best they could. Sydney did really well. She played without issue until the Under-16s with the guys.

"It didn't matter if it was guys or girls, she was part of it, like a sister, a friend of the boys. If they went to play at the school or in the park, they'd call Sydney to come and play with them. It was never a problem she was a girl."

Sicuro admits her parents were also important, by allowing their daughter the freedom to play boys' football and pursue her dream of becoming a professional footballer, as well as a good group of boys to play with too.

"She was lucky. She had the fortune to be playing with the 2007 boys group, who were really good. One is now at Hoffenheim in Germany, others are in Zurich in the first team, so the level was good for her."

Schertenleib played her first game for Zurich in October 2022, scoring on her debut. She spent one year in the club's first team before moving across the city to join Grasshopper. It was in the summer of 2024 that Barcelona came calling and, shortly after the move to Spain, Schertenleib was nominated as one of ten for the annual Golden Girl Award, still just 17 years old at the time.

A creative midfielder with an eye for goal, it was Schertenleib's qualities on the ball that attracted Barca to her.

"She had skills like no other," admits Sicuro. "She showed the guys how it

works, how they have to do it. She was not scared to play one-against-one with the boys. She didn't have any nerves to play against them – they were just her team-mates.

"Technically she was really good, with a mentality that she wanted to be better than the guys. If it was impossible, it was possible for her, no problem. She did it in a shy way, like: 'I don't want to show off'. She knew she was good but didn't want to show it. She had a bit more than the other girls, but you saw it, even though she was a child."

Another who came across Schertenleib more than once was former FC Zurich and Switzerland head coach Inka Grings, formerly a Germany international who won multiple international honours. Schertenleib was 15 when Grings first came across her in club football, but she had no hesitation about throwing her head first into senior football.

"I saw her and asked: 'Who is this?!'" Grings recalls. "She came into my squad at 15, it wasn't a problem. She'd played with the boys, which helped her. The development teams at Zurich are really, really good, and I was totally okay with her playing with the boys. It was an elite level team; it was the first time a girl could play with them.

"We wanted her for our Champions League qualifiers, but she was not allowed, which was a pity because if she had a chance she must play.

"I left and went to the Switzerland job. We spoke with all the youth team coaches, if we had an Under-17s Euros, World Cup qualifiers, it was clear

Mercurial... Schertenleib in action for Switzerland v England

Rubbing shoulders with the greats...Schertenleib holds off Lyon and Norway star Ada Hegerberg

Dribbler...Schertenleib takes on a couple of Iceland defenders in the UEFA Nations League

Sydney had to play. She was a game changer, it was clear when the season was done she came into the first team.

"But talent alone is not enough. She's humble, modest, smart – she's special. She's tall, athletic, a really amazing player. I was always in contact with her and her parents. When I heard the chance to go to Barcelona, what an opportunity – the style they play is perfect for Sydney."

Grings moved on from her role shortly before Schertenleib made her senior Swiss debut in February 2024, but a player who scored 64 goals for her country and won two European Championships provided a valuable mentor for the youngster.

Grings admits that there was debate about when the right time was to expose her to the senior team, for her own sake, even if they were keen to feature her as often as possible for the youth teams.

"That was really interesting to speak about with the coaches," she says. "My philosophy is when a player is good and can perform, the age is not interesting. I played when I was 15, and, while we cannot always compare, we had top players. Maybe our pool is smaller, but when you are good, you are good. They need time to make mistakes and know it's OK to make mistakes. It's not the PlayStation, you have to feel it and learn it.

"Switzerland is a small country; you don't find players like that all the time. Germany has over 80 million people. Switzerland maybe also doesn't have the pressure – we didn't have qualifiers – so we could build up the young players, especially in the Nations League, to be ready for the Euros."

There is no doubt that whatever happens this summer, Schertenleib is going to be a star both in Switzerland and beyond for the next generation.

> "I saw her and asked: 'Who is this?!'"
>
> **Schertenleib's former coach Inka Grings**

Both Sicuro and Grings believe the impact she will have can be transformational for young girls across the country.

"She's like a role model for each girl who starts to play in Switzerland," says Sicuro. "We never had a guy like this. [Manuel] Akanji at [Manchester] City, but he's 29 now. [Xherdan] Shaqiri played for Bayern and Liverpool but was not as talented as Sydney. We have [Yann] Sommer at Inter, but she's a role model for each girl now. If Sydney did it, you can do it. For such a little country, it's a big deal, a gift for us. She's here with us. We don't have to talk about role models elsewhere, Messi, Ronaldo, we have our own now."

Grings also hopes the same but is wary of putting too much expectation on young shoulders. "I hope so too, but at the moment it's not a good time, the team has been on a tough run going into the tournament.

"The mentality from supporters, they expect too much. There has been too much pressure on one or two players, which is not how it should be. Sydney cannot do that herself, it's her first tournament. She's a huge talent, someone who I hope will start all the games, but she's young and we cannot expect she is always the game changer. But she can be a big player for years to come, I'm convinced by it."

In good company...Schertenleib celebrates a Champions League goal last season with Barcelona team-mates Fridolina Rolfo and Aitana Bonmati, who will also take part in this summer's Euros

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INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP

All the action from June's window, including 2026 World Cup qualifiers from across the globe and the Nations League finals

UEFA Nations League final...Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo equalises v Spain *(more on page 52)*

- **UEFA Nations League** Finals *p52*
- **EUROPE:** 2026 World Cup qualifiers *p53*
- **SOUTH AMERICA:** 2026 World Cup qualifiers *p54*
- **CONCACAF:** 2026 World Cup qualifiers *p55*
- **ASIA:** 2026 World Cup qualifiers *p56*
- **BEST OF THE REST:** Friendlies & Asian Cup Qs *p57*

PORTUGAL WIN SECOND NATIONS LEAGUE CROWN

An unbreakable spirit proved a key ingredient as Portugal claimed victory in the fourth edition of the UEFA Nations League, sealing their second title in the short history of the competition with a 5-3 penalty-shootout win over holders Spain in the final in Munich. The Iberian neighbours were extremely well matched, ending the 120 minutes of no-holds-barred action tied at 2-2.

Portugal boss Roberto Martinez, not the most popular of figures in this part of the world, had good reason to lavish post-match praise on his side's "resilience", "character" and "ability to suffer". That was the *Selecao* throughout the final four: gutsy, hungry and ultimately unconquerable.

Some might consider the Nations League an international irrelevance. Not Portugal, who tellingly made a habit of coming from behind in the final four, recovering from a goal down to record a 2-1 semi-final win against hosts Germany and twice pegging back the much-fancied Spaniards in the final.

Every time the Portuguese had to pick up the slack against the Spanish to raise their game, they managed to do so. Within five minutes of Martin Zubimendi opening the scoring for *La Roja* midway through the first half, left-back Nuno Mendes had levelled with a sweetly struck angled drive. Nor were Martinez's side deterred when Spain regained the lead late in the first period through Mikel Oyarzabal, the evergreen Cristiano Ronaldo hooking in a deflected cross for an equaliser on the hour-mark.

UEFA Nations League champions...Cristiano Ronaldo raises the trophy for Portugal

Generational battle ...Ronaldo came out on top against Yamal

As Spain's control slowly ebbed away, Portugal found their second wind, inspired for the most part by the wondrous left-sided attacking combo of Man of the Match Nuno Mendes and substitute winger Rafael Leao, who plainly was in the mood to put on a show. With better finishing from substitutes Nelson Semedo and Diogo Jota, the *Selecao* would have had the match won in normal time. Instead, they had to wait for shootout consecration, Goncalo Ramos, Vitinha, Bruno Fernandes and Nuno Mendes all coolly converting prior to goalkeeping team-mate Diogo Costa saving Alvaro Morata's weak effort. To Ruben Neves the honour of slotting in the winning spot-kick.

A final billed as the clash of the ageing Portuguese icon (Cristiano Ronaldo) and the young Spanish pretender (Lamine Yamal) would emphatically end up with experience the victor. Ronaldo, the scorer of Portugal's winner versus Germany in his team's first final-four appointment, was truly decisive once again, while Yamal – who scored twice in the

5-4 semi-final victory over France – was completely neutralised by the outstanding Nuno Mendes and taken off battered and bowed in extra-time.

Magnanimous in defeat, Spain's coach Luis de la Fuente was anything but downbeat in his assessment of the loss. But deep down, he might well have it seen it coming. Leading the French 5-1 with just 11 minutes left, his side, complacent and sloppy, nearly contrived to throw the game away. In the final too, *La Roja* seemed to take their foot off the gas in the latter stages.

France, though far from at their best, still had the wherewithal to secure third place, seeing off a *Jekyll and Hyde* Germany 2-0 in Stuttgart. The *Nationalmannschaft*, enterprising and fluid going forward, easily could have been several goals to the good at the break, but paid the heaviest of prices for a lack of an in-form striker and their inability to deal with France's rapid counter-attacks. The pace of star man Kylian Mbappe, who gave his side an undeserved lead on the stroke of half-time, constantly had the German defenders at sixes and sevens. Just to rub salt into local wounds, the hosts gifted the French a second late on, Mbappe pouncing on an error from central defender Robin Koch, running on and unselfishly squaring the ball for Michael Olise to tap home.

Both of Germany's final-four defeats followed an identical script: a strong, purposeful first half with chances going begging followed by naive self-destruction after the interval. Germany midfielder Leon Goretzka thought poor game management was to blame. Skipper Joshua Kimmich, who earned his 100th cap at the tournament, attributed the losses to sub-optimal physical freshness.

> With better finishing from subs Nelson Semedo and Diogo Jota, the *Selecao* would have had the match won in normal time

One major plus for the French was the emergence of attacking midfielder Rayan Cherki, who then subsequently swapped Lyon for Manchester City. Making his international debut as a substitute against Spain, he had a dream half-hour cameo, involved in the build-up to two goals as well as smashing in a fine left-footed volley. Shades of Zinedine Zidane when he made a brilliant national team bow versus Czech Republic in 1994.

Nick Bidwell

NORWAY AND CROATIA ON FIRE, ITALY AND POLAND IN DISARRAY

Strong start... Haaland starred in Norway's 3-0 win over Italy

Shamefully absent for the last two World Cups, a shambolic Italy looked hell-bent on a hat-trick of main-event no-shows in their first qualifier for 2026, a thoroughly embarrassing 3-0 defeat to Norway on a rain-soaked night in Oslo.

Norway, 3-0 up at the break courtesy of goals from Alexander Sorloth, Antonio Nusa and Erling Haaland, were quite magnificent, especially effective on the counter-attack. But how their task was facilitated by the abject *Azzurri*, lethargic, badly organised and frequently giving the ball away.

Italy coach Luciano Spalletti, already hugely unpopular following their last-16 exit from Euro 2024, was duly sacked, though incongruously did remain in post for one final game a couple of days later, an unconvincing 2-0 Group I win over Moldova. Former Hajduk Split head coach Gennaro Gattuso, a World Cup winner with the Italians in 2006, was hired to replace him.

With Norway collecting a maximum 12 points from their first four games, Italy's hopes of winning the group seem compromised, with despair the order of the day up and down the peninsula.

After starting their Group L campaign in fine style, winning three out of three, Czech Republic came crashing back to earth with an almighty thud, humbled 5-1 by an impressive Croatia in Osijek, who themseves were coming off the back of a 7-0 win against Gibraltar. The Czechs would have been optimistic of achieving a positive result when skipper Tomas Soucek headed in an equaliser from a corner on the hour mark, but then came total disintegration: the conceding of four goals, including two penalties. Even at the grand old age of 39, Croatia legend Luka Modric can still pull the strings with the best.

Self-induced chaos continues to reign in Poland, where personality clashes are very much damaging their prospects in Group G. The decision of coach Michal Probierz to strip national team talisman Robert Lewandowski of the captaincy and replace him with Internazionale's Piotr Zielinski was always going to be a risky move and so it proved with the Barcelona striker responding that he would not play for Poland as long as Probierz remained at the helm.

Not the ideal way to prepare for a key qualifier in Helsinki against Finland, and unsurprisingly the Poles were not at the races, disjointed and unimaginative as they slumped to a 2-1 defeat. Just 48 hours later, the beleaguered Probierz handed in his resignation.

Finland stay top of the group with seven points from four fixtures, while the Netherlands – who began their schedule with a 2-0 win in Finland and 8-0 thrashing of Malta in Groningen – hover ominously over their shoulder.

Group J staged a classic game of two halves in a thriller between Belgium and Wales in Brussels, the Dragons sensationally turning a three-goal deficit into level-pegging before Belgian elder statesman Kevin De Bruyne popped up at the back post for a late, late winner.

North Macedonia, who won 1-0 in Kazakhstan earlier the same day, continue to set the pace in Group J, with eight points from a possible 12. Wales are a place and point further back.

England lead Group K – four points clear of Albania – but did little to impress in Thomas Tuchel's third game in charge, barely moving out of first gear in a 1-0 victory over Andorra in Barcelona. "I think we lacked the seriousness and the urgency that is needed in a World Cup qualifier," declared Tuchel afterwards.

Nick Bidwell

BRAZIL AND ECUADOR BOOK THEIR TICKETS

After Argentina sailed over the line in March, two more South American nations booked their places in next year's World Cup during June FIFA's window.

In the case of Ecuador, this was especially laudable. They began the campaign carrying a three-point penalty – a consequence of administrative irregularities in the Qatar qualifiers – but this was never a problem. Theirs has been a triumph of defensive solidity, conceding just five goals in 16 games – and only two in the ten rounds in which Sebastian Beccacece has been in charge. They made sure of their World Cup place with consecutive goalless draws, at home to Brazil and away to Peru.

That first match was the debut of Carlo Ancelotti as head coach of Brazil. The *Selecao's* previous game – a 4-1 slaughter at the hands of Argentina – had highlighted a need to balance attack and defence, and midfielder Casemiro was recalled to help provide the solution. After a tepid draw away to Ecuador, Ancelotti sprang something of a surprise with his attacking line-up against Paraguay; with Gabriel Martinelli and Matheus Cunha included along with Raphinha and Vinicius Junior, there seemed to be a risk that the side would be as top-heavy as the one destroyed by Argentina. But the front players worked hard, and their movement caused problems for the opposing defence, especially in the first half. Vini forced home the only goal, ensuring Brazil's World Cup presence on a night when the side gave a brief sketch of what might be possible a year ahead.

This was Paraguay's first defeat in the ten games since Gustavo Alfaro took over, a run which transformed the team from rank outsiders to all but mathematical certainties to appear in their first World Cup since 2010. There had been great rejoicing in Asuncion a few days earlier after a comfortable 2-0 victory over Uruguay took Paraguay to 24 points – seen as the magic number in the quest for an automatic slot.

But it was bad news for a Uruguay side that started the campaign hot and then seemed to run into a wall. It left the team with one win in nine games, the last three without a goal, much to the consternation of coach Marcelo Bielsa. He commented that he was setting the side up to attack, but that they were not creating chances. The subsequent 2-0 win at home to Venezuela, then, was extremely important – not least because a win for the visitors would have brought the two sides level on points and left Uruguay fretting about the possibility of finishing seventh and having to settle for a play-off berth.

It was shaping up as a frustrating night in Montevideo, with Bielsa's team pressing hard but posing little threat. But shortly before half-time they finally scored from their barrage of corners, and the victory also takes Uruguay to that 24-point total and on the verge of automatic qualification.

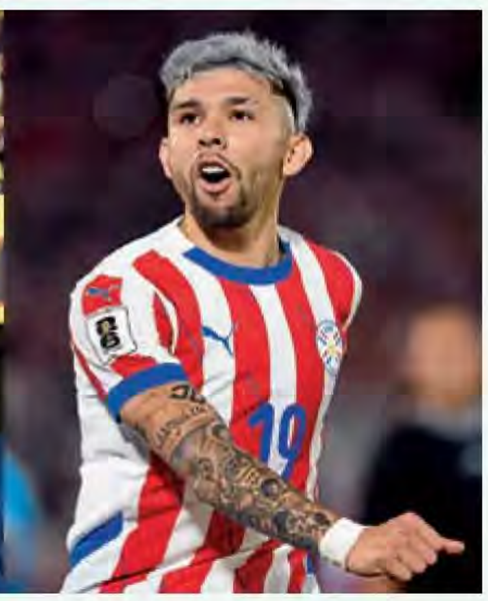
> Brazil ensured their World Cup presence on a night when the side gave a brief sketch of what might be possible a year ahead

Venezuela are left four points behind Colombia, who they host in the final round. The dream of an automatic place remains, but it seems unlikely. Once the form team, Colombia have had a bad year, with head coach Nestor Lorenzo needing to rethink his formula of two strikers plus James Rodriguez.

Qualification secured ...Brazil and Ecuador will both be in North America next summer

BELOW LEFT: Brazil bow...Carlo Ancelotti during his first game in charge of Brazil

BELOW: Almost there...Paraguay's Julio Enciso celebrates scoring against Uruguay



Their 0-0 draw at home to Peru was an appalling performance, but Luis Diaz returned from suspension to score a magnificent solo goal and secure an important 1-1 draw away to Argentina.

Colombia should claim the final automatic qualifying spot – which means that the dog fight for the play-off is between Venezuela and Bolivia. The sides met in Maturin, where a bizarre own goal helped Venezuela on the way to a 2-0 win – and there were post-match shenanigans when Bolivia's flight home was delayed, robbing them of time to prepare for the visit of Chile. It made no difference. They still won 2-0, leaving them just a point behind Venezuela with two games to go. The play-off spot, then, is likely to be settled on the last day.

Mathematically Peru still had a chance of snatching the spot. But in reality, that ship had long sailed – and a team which has played eight away games without scoring a single goal does not deserve to go to a World Cup anyway.

The Peruvians may be thinking wistfully of the days when Ricardo Gareca managed to forge them into a competitive unit. But the Argentine manager was unable to repeat the performance with Chile. He stepped down after two more defeats left Chile rooted to the foot of the table. Perhaps Chile's finest-ever moment was winning the 2016 Copa America in the USA. They will not be returning to the States for the ten-year anniversary.

Tim Vickery

SECOND ROUND OF QUALIFYING CONCLUDES

Safe passage... Jamaica's Demarai Gray and Warner Brown celebrate a goal Guatemala

The 12 CONCACAF teams that will compete in three groups of four for a place at the 2026 World Cup are now known after the region's second round of qualifying came to an end.

World Cup qualification from the host confederation always has an extra layer of interest. The results in the latest round went largely as expected, with one exception, which was not without controversy.

The second team to progress to the third round from Group A, along with group winners Honduras, came down to a game between Cuba and Bermuda on the final matchday in Santiago de Cuba. The Cubans ended up being without their first-choice goalkeeper, Raiko Arozarena, who plays his club football in the USL for Las Vegas Lights. Fearing he would face problems returning to the US from Cuba due to the draconian immigration measures put in place by the United States government, he ended up missing the game.

In the end, Cuba lost 2-1, and though Bermuda's progress is impressive, the Cubans' World Cup qualifying campaign was effectively decided not just on sporting merit, but also by the government policy of a World Cup host nation.

This incident, plus other issues around recent tournaments, including the CONCACAF Gold Cup and FIFA Club World Cup, raises questions as to the suitability of the US to host such international events.

Bermuda were the only nation outside the 12 top-ranked teams to progress from a field of 30 that was split into six groups. Second-highest seeds Costa Rica were the most convincing of the lot.

Though Panama have been the standout team from Central America in recent years, Costa Rica are one of the teams that regularly look to challenge the bigger (at least by area) nations to the north. The pair were among five teams, along with Honduras, Curacao and Jamaica, to boast perfect records in this stage. The Costa Ricans scored 17 goals across their four games and only conceded once, in a 2-1 win against Trinidad & Tobago on the final matchday.

Elsewhere, Curacao are aiming to become the smallest island nation to qualify for a World Cup, and were solid throughout in Group C. They ended on a high with a 5-1 win against similarly-ranked Haiti, and their striker Gervane Kastaneer ended the round as joint-top scorer, on five goals alongside Oalex Anderson of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

Jamaica were the least convincing of the higher-ranked teams during this stage. Though the Reggae Boyz also won all four games and topped their group, there were some narrow victories among them in games where they would have been expected to rack up the goals. Steve McClaren's side did round things off with a more encouraging win though, defeating the next strongest team in the group, Guatemala, 3-0, taking them to a slightly more respectable eight goals across the four games.

Jamaica-based forward Warner Brown, who plays his club football for Arnett Gardens, scored twice in that win, having also scored the only goal against the British Virgin Islands in Road Town. Brown only made his Jamaica debut in February, but now has three goals in two World Cup qualifiers to add to the one he scored in the Gold Cup prelim against Saint Vincent and the Grenadines in March.

He'll be one to look out for in the third round, where Jamaica have been drawn in a potentially tricky group alongside Trinidad & Tobago, Bermuda and Curacao.

The third round groups are tough tests for all involved, though. One of CONCACAF's South American members, Suriname, remain in the mix, but have been drawn in a group with Panama, El Salvador and Guatemala, while the group involving Costa Rica, Honduras, Haiti and Nicaragua is well-matched rankings-wise.

> Bermuda were the only nation outside the 12 top-ranked teams to progress from a field of 30

One team from each of the three groups will secure their place at the World Cup, and the two best runners-up will head into the inter-confederation play-offs for one last shot at an appearance in a World Cup close to home.

James Nalton

WORLD CUP DEBUTANTS SECURE THEIR SPOTS

Six of Asia's eight World Cup qualifying spots have now been claimed. Japan and Iran had already become the first two to book their tickets, confirming their qualification back in March, and they were joined by four others in June.

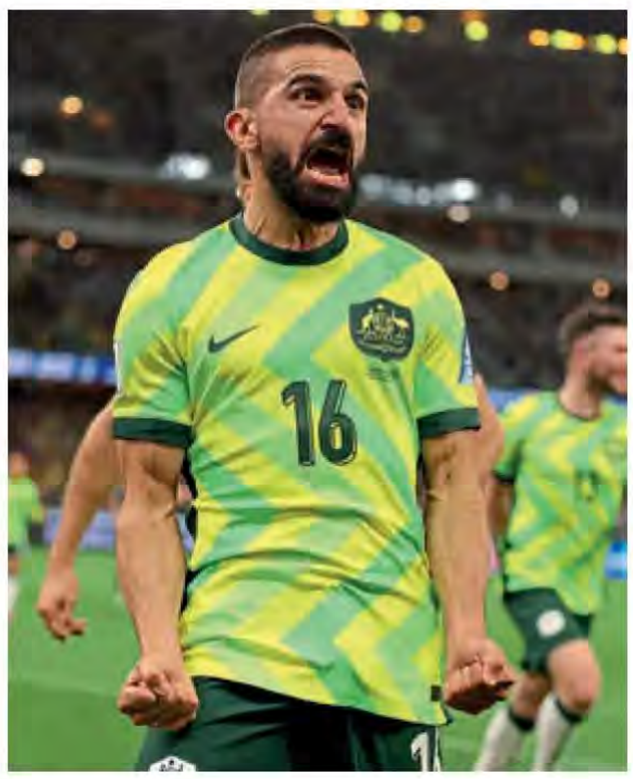
The first was Uzbekistan, making up for coming so close to making the 2006, 2014 and 2018 tournaments before failing or being unlucky right at the end. After the drama of the past, a dull 0-0 draw in the United Arab Emirates did the job. The neutrals may not have enjoyed the Abu Dhabi clash, but the White Wolves were happy to sit back and let goalkeeper Utkir Yusupov make saves and waste a little time to get the glory and stop the hosts getting theirs.

Unlike some other national teams in Asia – including the UAE – Uzbekistan haven't gone down the naturalisation route, instead building a thriving youth development system that has been bearing fruit at the Under-17, Under-20 and Under-23 levels. Now it has delivered the main prize that the country has been waiting for as the Central Asians qualified behind Iran in Group A.

At the same time that football was welcoming a new name in the tournament, in Group B, Jordan were winning 3-0 in Oman thanks to a hat-trick from Ali Olwan to move close to a first-ever qualification themselves. The *Nashama* had to wait for a couple of hours to be sure.

Iraq could have taken it down to the wire had they beaten South Korea in front of more than 55,000 spectators in Basra. In a fevered atmosphere, the Koreans, with their European experience, kept their heads while Iraq lost theirs. It was not a surprise when a red card was brandished early on, with Ipswich Town striker Ali Al Hamadi dismissed. After that, Iraq were never going to get the three points needed to take Jordan to the final game. The Koreans won 2-0, thanks to goals by Kim Jin-gyu and Oh Hyeon-gyu, and went on to become the only unbeaten team in Asian qualification and secure an 11th successive World Cup appearance for the Taegeuk Warriors, a streak bettered only by Brazil, Argentina, Germany and Spain.

As for Group C, Japan dominated and were the first of any in the world to qualify, which meant that they took an experimental team to Australia for the penultimate game. That didn't go down too well in Saudi Arabia, who needed the Samurai Blue to take points off the Socceroos in the fight for second. They almost did and were in control but Australia somehow got a last-minute victory through Aziz Behich. Saudi Arabia kept vaguely in touch with a 2-0 win in Bahrain but it wasn't enough.



ABOVE: Debutants... Uzbekistan players celebrate after qualifying for their first-ever World Cup

Last-gasp winner ...Australia's Aziz Behich celebrates scoring v Japan

The Green Falcons had to beat Australia by five goals on the final day to make a seventh finals appearance, but that was never going to happen. Despite an early scare, Australia won 2-1 to take the sixth and last direct spot.

It also meant that Saudi Arabia have been shunted into the fourth round with the five other teams who finished third and fourth in the three groups, which kicks off in October. By then, with the draw taking place on July 17, the half-dozen will be split into two groups of three with the winners going to the World Cup and the two second-placed teams playing-off for the chance for a final intercontinental showdown.

> Uzbekistan made up for coming so close to making the 2006, 2014 and 2018 tournaments before failing or being unlucky right at the end

Saudi Arabia are one of the teams disappointed to be there. The same can be said for Qatar, whose poor start saw former Spain, Real Madrid and West Ham United manager Julen Lopetegui drafted in with two games remaining to record a win and a loss. The United Arab Emirates are there too after, like Qatar, appointing a coach with two games to go, in the form of Cosmin Olaroiu. There was still a chance for them to get through but they had to beat Uzbekistan to have any chance and failed.

Iraq, now led by Graham Arnold, who left his post as Australia coach in September, were disappointed not to make it directly but the damage had been done with one point from games against Kuwait and Palestine in March, results that cost Jesus Casas his job.

There is little doubt that Indonesia are happy to be there, not making it so far since 1938. Oman too are thrilled to be closer than ever before but needed a controversial 97th-minute penalty against Palestine in the final game to do it. That eliminated Palestine who joined five others who are completely out: Kuwait, North Korea, Kyrgyzstan, Bahrain and China.

John Duerden

MIXED RESULTS FOR WORLD CUP HOSTS

Reality check...the USA were thrashed 4-0 by Switzerland

The United States, Mexico and Canada each hosted friendlies against non-CONCACAF opponents with mixed results in preparation for the Gold Cup.

For the US and their head coach Mauricio Pochettino, the June international break was something of a disaster. They went 1-0 up inside the first minute against Turkey before slumping to a 2-1 defeat, but it got a whole lot worse a few days later. A team lacking many of its most high-profile names was humbled 4-0 by Switzerland, with boos echoing around Nashville's Geodis Park as the fourth goal hit the net in the 36th minute.

The Swiss for their part had an enjoyable trip to the States, having already beaten Mexico 4-2 in Salt Lake City. *El Tri* did bounce back, though, with midfielder Orbelin Pineda on target in a 1-0 win over Turkey in North Carolina.

Of the three 2026 World Cup hosts, Canada and Jesse Marsch enjoyed the most positive June window. First, they saw off Ukraine thanks to a brace from an out-of-contract Jonathan David, a debut goal from Promise David and a first international strike since the 2022 World Cup qualification campaign for Tajon Buchanan. The Canadians were 4-0 up and cruising when the Ukrainians reclaimed some pride with two late goals.

A few days later, it was African champions Ivory Coast's turn to visit BMO Field in Toronto. With both teams hoping to experience knockout football over the next 12 months, the goalless draw was settled by a penalty shootout, which the visitors won 5-4.

SENEGAL MAKE HISTORY

June's international friendlies largely had a sense of fatigue about them, but there were positives to take for some of the teams involved.

Senegal became the first-ever African nation to beat England, bouncing back from conceding first to win 3-1, and bringing the Three Lions' 21-game sequence against African opposition to an end. Thomas Tuchel's side were booed off but it was a well-deserved victory for the visitors, who extended their own unbeaten streak to 22 matches. They even did it without captain and star man Sadio Mane, who asked to be excused for June's action. Whether he returns for September's World Cup qualifiers, or the AFCON in Morocco, remains to be seen.

> A USA team lacking many of its most high-profile names was humbled 4-0 by Switzerland, with boos echoing around Nashville's Geodis Park

That win concluded a successful trip to the UK and Ireland for the Senegalese, coming just a few days after a 1-1 draw in Dublin. The Irish followed that up with a 0-0 draw in Luxembourg, which stretched their unbeaten run under manager Heimir Hallgrimsson to four games, although the jury is still out on the Icelandic coach.

History makers... Senegal celebrate beating England

Elsewhere in Europe, there were positive stories for Greece, who played in Crete for the first time since 2012 and secured thumping victories against Slovakia (4-1) and Bulgaria (4-0), and Sweden. The Swedes, without either of their in-demand strikers Viktor Gyokeres or Alexander Isak, beat Hungary 2-0 in Budapest before an entertaining 4-3 win over Algeria in Solna.

The latter was one of several friendlies involving African teams, for whom AFCON qualifying concluded last November and 2026 World Cup qualifying takes a break between March and September. Not taking part, however, was Zambia, whose FA was forced to cancel friendlies versus Sudan and Tunisia after a player boycott over unpaid allowances. They did, however, manage to field a team for the 2025 COSAFA Cup, where the *Chipolopolo* finished bottom of their group.

ALL TO PLAY FOR IN ASIAN CUP

The road to the 2027 Asian Cup in Saudi Arabia remains wide open with two matchdays concluded in the third round of qualification.

While most of the region's big guns have already secured their spots via their performances in World Cup qualifying, 24 teams are still attempting to qualify. There are six groups of four teams, with only the group winners advancing.

Calling upon a largely naturalised, European-born squad, the pressure is on the Philippines to advance from Group A, but they were held to a 2-2 draw at home to Tajikistan. Oslo-born forward Bjorn Martin Kristensen scored a brace, taking his international haul to an impressive eight goals in 13 games.

Alarm bells will be ringing for Vietnam, who have qualified for the last two Asian Cup tournaments but were thumped 4-0 by southeast Asian rivals Malaysia, who top the group with six points out of six.

India's hopes of a third successive qualification are also under threat after they lost 1-0 to Hong Kong via a 94th minute penalty.

In Group E, Syria and Myanmar have set up a tense October meeting after both won their first two games.

Qualifying continues in October and concludes in March 2026.

Jamie Evans

Argentina

Arch-rivals...River Plate and Boca Juniors contest the *Superclasico*

2025 TEAMS

ZONE A

- Aldosivi
- Argentinos Juniors
- Banfield
- Barracas Central
- Belgrano
- Boca Juniors
- Central Cordoba
- Defensa y Justicia
- Estudiantes
- Huracan
- Independiente Rivadavia
- Newell's Old Boys
- Racing
- Tigre
- Union

ZONE B

- Atletico Tucuman
- Deportivo Riestra
- Gimnasia y Esgrima
- Godoy Cruz
- Independiente
- Instituto
- Lanus
- Platense
- River Plate
- Rosario Central
- San Lorenzo
- San Martin
- Sarmiento
- Talleres
- Velez Sarsfield

ARGENTINE PRIMERA DIVISION – A BRIEF HISTORY

The oldest professional football league outside the UK is dominated by the *Superclasico* teams, River Plate and Boca Juniors, who boast 38 and 35 titles respectively. Alongside them, Racing, Independiente and San Lorenzo make up the "Big Five".

Historically, Argentina may have more Libertadores titles than Brazil, but Brazilian sides have won the last six Copas – a sign that Argentina is falling behind. Boca reached the final in 2023, but the last Argentine winners were River Plate in 2018.

Nonetheless, Argentine clubs continue to produce top-class talent for export. The league remains famed for its matchday atmosphere, although away fans have been banned for 12 years due to violence.

THE FORMAT

The league format has been in constant transition for ten years since the first division expanded to 30 teams. Despite the complications of such a bloated league, the 2022 World Cup win gave political capital to the AFA president Claudio Tapia, who shows no signs of reverting the number of teams to 20.

This year features two short competitions, the Apertura and Clausura, with the teams split into two leagues of 15. They play each other once, then one game against a rival from the other zone and one more game against an opponent drawn at random, taking the number of matchdays to 16. The top six teams from both zones progress to the knockout phase.

HONOURS BOARD

Club	*Title wins*	*Runners-up*	*Last title*
River Plate	38	34	2023
Boca Juniors	35	22	2022
Racing	18	9	2018-19
Independiente	16	16	2002
San Lorenzo	15	16	2013
Velez Sarsfield	11	9	2024

Who is Real Madrid's new €45 million signing?
Less than half an hour into Argentina's showcase match, the *Superclasico*, between River Plate and Boca Juniors in April, River won a free-kick nearly 30 yards out from goal. With the high-stakes Buenos Aires derby still goalless, teenager Franco Mastantuono nonchalantly placed the ball, before stepping up and curling an astonishing shot past Agustin Marchesin in Boca's goal.

It was perhaps the defining moment of the Apertura league stage. The goal brought international attention to the 17-year-old, who would go on to contribute seven goals and four assists in 19 games in 2025. His flair, skill and raw talent was enough to convince Real Madrid to pay his release clause of €45m. The total amount the Spaniards will pay is €63m, the most expensive transfer in Argentine history.

Mastantuono has been on the fast track for a couple of years now. At the age of 15, he was already with the Argentina Under-20s, and in June he became Argentina's youngest player in a competitive game, replacing Thiago Almada for the final minutes of the World Cup qualifier against Chile.

Gaining minutes under Marcelo Gallardo at River Plate, the teenager has progressed; he has the verve, the ingenuity and the drive. "We need everyone around him to know that they're looking at a 17-year-old boy, and we need to help him become even better," said Lionel Scaloni after handing him his international debut.

Where does Mastantuono's sale leave River Plate?
River had hoped to keep the youngster until the end of the year for the Copa Libertadores campaign, to mirror similar agreements the club managed to negotiate when Julian Alvarez and Claudio Echeverri moved to Manchester City, but it wasn't to be. "It was this or nothing," said River's president Jorge Brito as Real Madrid played hardball given interest in the player from Paris Saint-Germain.

The wonderkid leaves a River Plate side still working to rediscover its identity under the guidance of coach Gallardo. A legend in South American football who already has a statue outside the Monumental, Gallardo oversaw the club's most successful period between 2014 and 2022, winning two Copas Libertadores and the Sudamericana, among other trophies. He returned for a second spell in charge after Martin Demichelis departed in August 2024, but so far has struggled to find the old momentum.

ONE TO WATCH

Valentin GOMEZ

(Velez Sarsfield)

The young centre-back only made his debut in 2022 and played for Argentina at the Under-20 World Cup in 2023. He was arguably the best player in the league in 2024 as Velez Sarsfield won the first division title, yet three subsequent transfers have fallen through, the latest a move to Udinese that failed to materialise (see main article). Just turned 22 and already one of the most highly-rated defenders in the league, possessing a turn of pace, a love of tackles and blocks, and a calm left foot.

River invested heavily ahead of this season, bringing forward Sebastian Driussi back to the club from MLS for over US$10m. Gonzalo Montiel, who scored Argentina's World Cup-winning penalty against France in 2022, also returned to the club, with the right-back joining a back-line of world champions in the form of goalkeeper Franco Armani, centre-back German Pezzella and left-back Marcos Acuna (signed from Sevilla).

Yet defensive frailties continued and, unusually for River, the team struggled to find the net – outscored by five teams during the Apertura league stage.

Gallardo found a response from his players in time to win the *Superclasico*, and also to top their Copa Libertadores group. But it was not enough to remain competitive in the domestic league, losing on penalties against eventual champions Platense in the quarter-finals.

Given the investment – both financial and emotional – in bringing all these stars home, more is expected of them.

What about Boca Juniors?
Boca will want to put the first half of 2025 well behind them. Under coach Fernando Gago, the *Xeneize* faced an early test in the Libertadores. The club was forced to go through the qualification phase in order to reach the group stage, in itself an affront to the six-time champions. Yet worse was to come.

After losing the first leg away to Peru's Alianza Lima, Boca could only take the tie to penalties back home at the Bombonera. Alan Velasco missed the final spot-kick and Boca were knocked out of the Libertadores and also out of the Sudamericana.

Magic moment... Franco Mastantuono scores a stunning free-kick v Boca

Boca Juniors icons... club president Juan Roman Riquelme and returning manager Miguel Angel Russo

With no continental football, the league took on even greater importance but performances were still poor. Fielding five defenders at the Monumental and losing 2-1 to River in the *Superclasico* was the final straw. Gago was sacked after just six months in the job.

That string of results brought about an unthinkable situation, with the Bombonera jeering club legend and president Juan Roman Riquelme.

He turned to his old coach Miguel Angel Russo, who is back for a third spell. The 69-year-old led the club to Libertadores success in 2007, with Riquelme the playmaker, but he has a huge task on his hands to change the narrative at the club.

Who is the latest big name to be heading back home?

Across Argentina, fans hold on to the hope that former players and heroes will return to finish their careers at the clubs where they began.

There are several high-profile cases of stars returning to Argentina after illustrious careers in Europe: Carlos Tevez re-joined Boca after spells with West Ham United, both Manchester clubs and Juventus; Juan Sebastian Veron returned to Estudiantes following a distinguished spell in Italy – and not so successful stint in England – and lifted the Copa Libertadores; fresh off the treble with Internazionale, Diego Milito won the league title after moving back to Racing; and, further back, Mario Kempes was still in his prime when he joined River Plate from Valencia in the early 1980s, having won the 1978 World Cup.

But the case of Angel Di Maria announcing his return to Rosario Central this year is unique. There are few players of his stature in the current generation.

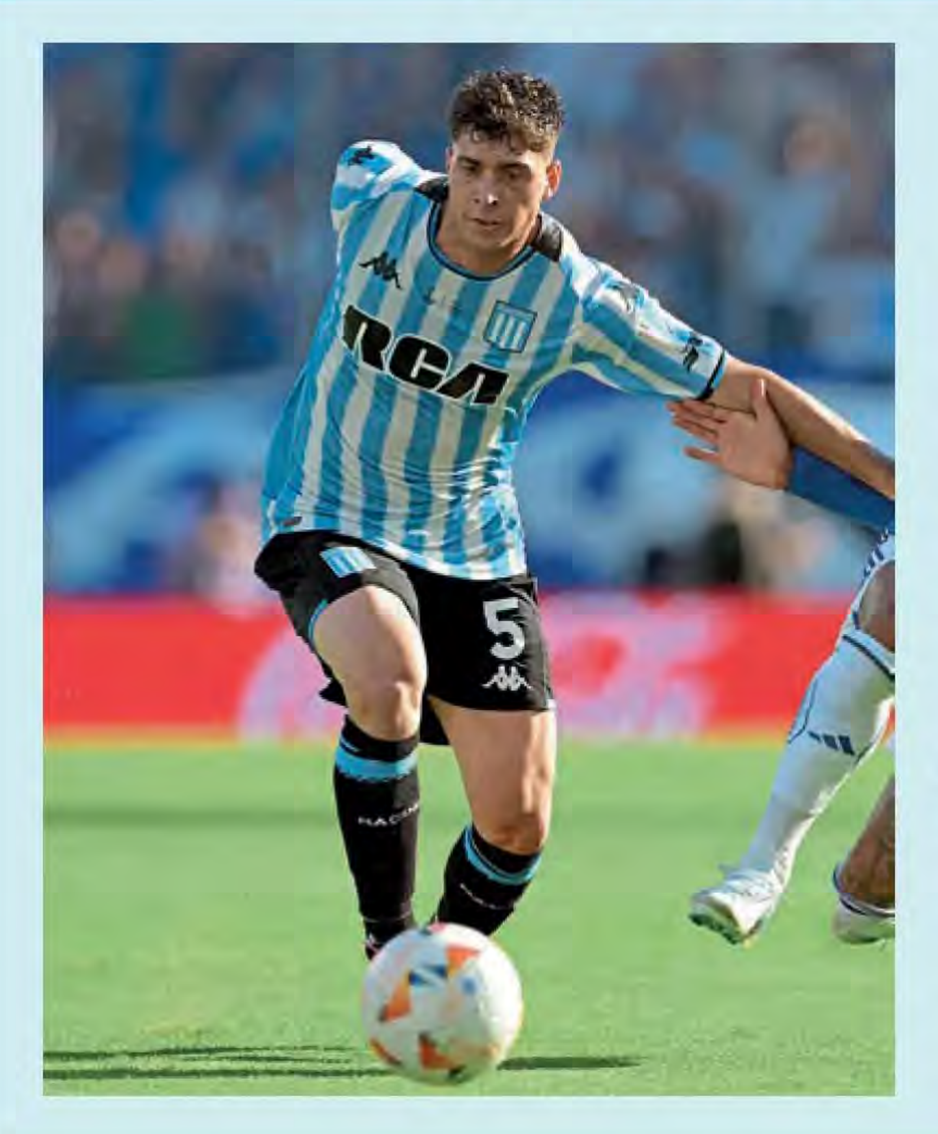
Di Maria left Central in 2007. His club career took him from Benfica to Real Madrid, Manchester United, Paris Saint-Germain and Juventus. His performances with Argentina made him a national hero and a legend in Rosario, from the winner against Brazil at the Maracana in the 2021 Copa America to his brilliant goal in the 2022 World Cup final against France. With 36 titles to his name, only his fellow *Rosarino* Leo Messi has more winners' medals.

Di Maria had previously said he would not return to Rosario after receiving threats against this family, and the question of security in a city scarred by drug-related violence makes his return to Central a challenge for the club, the city and the authorities as one of Argentina's most decorated stars plays out the last days of his career in Rosario.

What is the club ownership debate that dominates Argentine football?

When Central were last crowned champions in late 2023, winning the Copa de la Liga, anarcho-capitalist Javier Milei took office as president of Argentina. The Libertarian ushered in policies aimed at radical structural reforms. His austerity programme is symbolised by a chainsaw. He is looking to privatise swathes

ONE TO WATCH



Juan Ignacio NARDONI

(Racing)

The complete midfielder, Nardoni has been integral to Racing's recent success. After moving to Avellaneda from Union de Santa Fe in 2023, he quickly established himself as one of the league's top midfielders. Nardoni was a vital cog in Racing's 2024 Sudamericana-winning side, which also won the 2025 Recopa beating Libertadores champions Botafogo. His performances have attracted interest from abroad and the national team. "We have a group of players, but there's always room for those who stand out," said Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni. "Nardoni is one of those names we keep an eye on."

ONE TO WATCH

Kevin LOMONACO

(Independiente)

The 23-year-old defender's dominant performances for Independiente earned him an Argentina call-up for the recent World Cup qualifiers. Strong in the tackle, Lomonaco likes to bring the ball out of defence and was one of the standout performers in the 2025 Apertura. "Pure hierarchy, he is a free soul on the pitch," says Independiente coach Julio Vaccari. A 2022 move to Red Bull Bragantino in Brazil ended in suspension amid a betting scandal after he admitted to receiving money to earn a booking. Recent performances have put his hugely promising career back on track and in line for a regular role in the national team.

of the economy, and football is part of the plan.

"For its roots, its history, and everything this club represents," posted Central at the time, "we ratify our position as a non-profit association. The club belongs to its members."

Argentine clubs are owned by their members who vote for the authorities. They play broad roles in the community and are an intrinsic part of the country's social fabric. Yet many are also wading in debt and in desperate need of investment.

In 2024, Milei issued a decree to force clubs to amend the statutes in order to be allowed to become private sporting corporations instead of non-profit associations. Courts blocked the move, but the debate continues.

When Diego Milito was elected president of Racing in December 2024, he was categorical about the model he defends. "There is no place for private ownership in Argentine football. I absolutely believe in non-profit civil associations."

On the other side of the debate is Estudiantes president, Juan Sebastian Veron. "Argentine football could be so much better, in every sense," he argued. "I have no doubt that the growth of an institution needs the private and public sectors to work hand in hand."

Veron planned a hybrid model and worked alongside US businessman Foster Gillett, who travelled to Argentina with the intention of being the first investor if the country opened up to private finance.

"The talent the world wants is here," said Gillett last year. "The culture and passion everyone else is trying to copy are already here. What I think is important is that we bring the business side of the game in line with what already exists."

Foster Gillett is the son of George Gillett, who bought Liverpool with Tom Hicks in 2007, before selling to Fenway Sports Group in 2010. The plan was for an injection of capital to Estudiantes, and his first move was to help fund midfielder Cristian Medina's move from Boca to Estudiantes earlier this year.

But then came two rather confusing episodes involving Gillett and the release clauses of River Plate midfielder Rodrigo Villagra and Velez Sarsfield defender Valentin Gomez. Gomez was in Italy awaiting his transfer to Udinese, but Velez never received the funds buying Gomez out of his contract.

"Foster is the person responsible for this," claimed the defender upon returning to Argentina. "They had me crying in a room for ten days, I was unable to train."

Villagra ended up at CSKA Moscow in a deal brokered between the clubs, not through Gillett.

The American's representatives in Argentina denied there having been any firm commitment to pay the buy-out clauses of the players.

Meanwhile, the AFA continues to resist any move to change how clubs are organised. "It is not what we want," said AFA president Claudio Tapia, "or what we represent."

Joel Richards

Rosario icon...a mural of Angel Di Maria, who is set to return home

FC Andorra

The club has provided a platform for former Spain and Barcelona defender Gerard Pique to become a trailblazer as a player-turned-owner

MCO FILES

Club: FC Andorra
Owners: Gerard Pique and Kosmos Holding
MCO connections:
Pique also owns another club in the lower reaches of Spanish football, Gimnastic Manresa.

The idea of players buying into football clubs is becoming increasingly common as stars use their hefty wages and status to help secure a place in the game after hanging up their boots.

That path was blazed by Barcelona legend Gerard Pique, who was still at his peak when he set up Kosmos Global Holding in 2017 with Japanese billionaire Hiroshi Mikitani. In December 2018, Kosmos agreed an unlikely deal to buy into FC Andorra with local investors in the Pyrenean microstate.

ABOVE: Trailblazer ...Gerard Pique was the first of many players to become a club owner

"The idea was to build a club with a unique DNA. FC Andorra is unique: The club represents a whole country and it fits with the Kosmos way of thinking," says Ferran Vilaseca, the club's president and chief legal officer at Kosmos. "At Kosmos, we look for opportunities in sport to push boundaries, to innovate, and to achieve ambitious results that change the landscape."

FC Andorra is certainly unique in the Spanish leagues. When the club was formed in 1942, there was no domestic league, so FC Andorra affiliated with the Catalan Football Federation and joined the Spanish league system in 1948.

Apart from winning the Copa Catalunya in 1993-94, FC Andorra's existence was largely unspectacular and spent mostly in Spain's lower leagues until Pique and Kosmos took control. They reached the Segunda Division B, then the third tier of Spanish football, in 1981 and remained at that level for 17 years, barring one slip back down to the fourth tier. Then for the next two decades the club drifted around the Catalan regional divisions, before seeing a sea-change upon Pique and Kosmos' arrival. The takeover produced immediate results as the club won the 2018-19 regional First Catalan Division with a 2-0 final-day victory over UE Vilassar de Mar.

Then in July 2019, the club achieved an unusual double promotion, paying

a €452,022 fee to replace CF Reus Deportiu in the Segunda Division B – seeing off competition for the vacant spot from Zamora, Real Jaen, Linares Deportivo and FC Intercity – after Reus were relegated as a result of financial problems.

That same year, Kosmos was also reportedly interested in buying English League Two side Notts County. Owner Alan Hardy needed a quick sale of the club due to a looming tax bill, but Kosmos was pipped by Christoffer and Alexander Reedtz, who are also part of a group that now owns Danish side Viborg FF.

Instead, Kosmos acquired a majority stake in Gimnastic Manresa, which is based halfway between Andorra and the Kosmos base in Barcelona.

In 2020-21, FC Andorra made the play-offs but missed out on promotion, only to top the league a year later and win a place in the second tier for the first time in the club's history. Crowds had struggled to reach three figures when Kosmos took control, but a capacity crowd of nearly 4,000 watched FC Andorra seal promotion.

Average crowds of 1,000 to 1,200 in the third tier doubled in the second tier. In order to meet La Liga's stadium criteria, the club moved into the Estadi Nacional in the centre of Andorra la Vella, which was redeveloped in 2018 with a €2 million grant from UEFA's HatTrick programme.

Kosmos has since largely eschewed the traditional multi-club ownership expansion route and Vilaseca does not see the business as an MCO, but the group has connections with a number of other clubs around the world.

Mikitani, the founder of tech giant Rakuten, is chairman of Vissel Kobe in the J. League, and Pique's agent Arturo Canales has helped bring players to the Japanese football giants.

Another co-founder, Nullah Sarker from investors Cedar Capital, is an investor in the Black Knight Football Group, which owns English Premier League side Bournemouth, A-League franchise Auckland FC and has stakes in France's Lorient and Hibernian in Scotland. Edmund Chu, another Kosmos director, is on the board at Portuguese second-tier side Vizela.

Big ambitions... Pique during his first press conference as FC Andorra owner in April 2019

> **Kosmos has largely eschewed the traditional multi-club ownership expansion route, but the group has connections with a number of other clubs around the world**

FC Andorra investor ...Hiroshi Mikitani

Kosmos also has other football interests in the seven-a-side Kings League competition, which unites ex-pros with YouTubers and was started in 2022. It has since spread to Italy, Brazil, France and Germany and spawned a women's edition.

Kosmos also works in marketing, and in 2019 helped agree a deal with Saudi Arabian sports marketing firm Sela to relocate the Spanish Super Cup to the Middle Eastern kingdom. According to Spanish media outlet *El Confidencial*, the Royal Spanish Football Federation signed an initial six-year deal that guaranteed the RFEF €40m for every Super Cup played in Saudi Arabia.

Despite controversy surrounding the agreement, the deal has since been extended to ten years, until 2029, with further reports in January claiming the RFEF plan to enter into negotiations to extend the contract until 2034.

Outside football, Kosmos has an esports team and a video production arm and in 2018 signed a deal with the International Tennis Federation to "reimagine" the Davis Cup. That agreement ended early in 2023. With Pique making the last of his 616 appearances for Barcelona and retiring in November 2022, Kosmos

Other investments...Pique in attendance at his popular Kings League event

Promoted...FC Andorra saw off Ibiza and Ponferradina in the play-offs

has since stuck with football.

The club was widely reported as being involved in the formation of a new Indian club, Inter Kashi, along with another Andorran club, Inter Escaldes, but Vilaseca says those stories are not true.

FC Andorra has also been trying to build a new stadium, but plans collapsed in early 2025 after the owner of a proposed site at Borda Mateu decided against leasing the land to the club. Pique responded by criticising the artificial pitch that the teams share, and also by calling out the Andorran government: "We have been here for six years and have proven that this is a serious project," he declared in a press conference. "But if the government does not provide an immediate solution, we will make our own decisions. We cannot continue like this."

On the pitch, FC Andorra were relegated from the Segunda Division in 2023-24 but bounced straight back up this past campaign via the play-offs. After defeating Ibiza 3-0 on aggregate in the semi-finals, they then saw off Ponferradina in the final 2-1 over two legs. Staying in La Liga 2 is essential for Pique and Kosmos' project.

Steve Menary

Estadi Nacional ...the club shares their stadium with the national rugby and football teams

Players-turned-owners

FC Andorra owner Gerard Pique is not the only footballer to invest in a club

With wages booming, an increasing number of high-profile players have been able to buy stakes in one or more clubs.

Kylian Mbappe's Interconnected Ventures bought a majority stake in the French club Caen through its investment arm, Coalition Capital, for a reported €15 million last year, while in February Real Madrid co-star Vinicius Junior invested in Portuguese club Alverca, who achieved promotion to the Primeira Liga in May. In April, their then-team-mate Luka Modric invested in EFL Championship side Swansea City.

So far, that trio have stuck at one club but plenty of other big stars have begun to embrace multi-club ownership.

The same year that Gerard Pique acquired FC Andorra, Brazilian legend Ronaldo purchased an 82 per cent stake in Spain's Real Valladolid. Three years later, he acquired his old club Cruzeiro but abandoned his putative MCO venture after selling his Brazilian stake last year. He walked away from Real Valladolid earlier this summer too, amid fan protests as the club finished rock bottom of La Liga.

Japanese legend Keisuke Honda has made multiple attempts to build an MCO portfolio, but without success. The former Japan midfielder was still playing for Milan when he bought a 49 per cent stake in Austrian lower-league club FC Horn in 2015 but pulled out four years later. In 2016, he set up a club in Cambodia, Soltilo Angkor, which led to him taking over as Cambodia's national team coach two years later. But in 2023, the club folded amid financial problems.

Honda runs the Soltilo soccer management company with over 3,000 students in different countries and he has also bought into Orange County Soccer Club of the United Soccer League and Uganda's Bright Stars.

Other former legends have had more success. Marcelo was part of a consortium that bought Brazilian side Azuriz in 2018. Three years later, the ex-Brazil and Real Madrid left-back also bought a majority stake in Portuguese second-tier side CD Mafra.

Goran Pandev, the North Macedonian legend who starred for Lazio, Internazionale, Napoli and Genoa, founded an academy in his homeland that has become a leading club and is now part of the Brera MCO group with Pandev still involved.

In 2022, Wilfried Zaha and his brother Carin bought Espoire Club D'Abengourou in the Ivory Coast. A year later, he joined rapper Stormzy in buying Isthmian League club Croydon Athletic.

Former Newcastle United and Chelsea striker Demba Ba bought Amitie FC in his native Senegal in 2022 and followed that up in 2023 with the acquisition of USL Dunkerque, who reached the French cup semi-final this past season amid thrilling giant-killings.

Club owner...Inter Miami co-owner David Beckham

What has changed in recent years is a wave of US investors setting up MCO portfolios, which has started to encompass United States national team players.

Tyler Adams, who plays in the Premier League for Bournemouth, has joined the ranks of club owners with a stake in United Soccer League expansion franchise, Westchester, alongside New York Jets quarterback Tyrod Taylor.

"Growing up in Dutchess County, I've seen first-hand how soccer can bring people together and inspire young players to dream big," said Adams. "Joining this ownership group is not only an honour but also an incredible chance to give back to the region that played such a huge role in my journey."

With the World Cup in the USA next year, Adams is unlikely to be the only US national team player tempted by a role off the pitch.

Steve Menary

SELECTED PLAYERS WITH STAKES IN CLUBS

- **David Beckham**, Inter Miami *(USA)*
- **Didier Drogba**, Phoenix Rising *(USA)*
- **Patrice Evra**, Estrela da Amadora *(Portugal)*
- **Thierry Henry**, Como *(Italy)*
- **Zlatan Ibrahimovic**, Hammarby *(Sweden)*
- **N'Golo Kante**, Virton *(Belgium)*
- **Juan Mata**, San Diego FC *(USA)*
- **Kylian Mbappe**, Caen *(France)*
- **Luka Modric**, Swansea City *(Wales)*
- **Vinicius Junior**, Alverca *(Portugal)*

CHRISTIAN BURGESS

"It's been a ridiculous journey. Almost unbelievable"

The rise of Union Saint-Gilloise from the second tier to Belgian champions has been one of European football's most remarkable stories of recent years, and their English centre-back has been at the heart of it

Congratulations on winning the Belgian Pro League title. After coming so close in recent years, how does it feel to have actually done it?
It feels good. It's almost disbelief, because we weren't expected to do it this year and I thought we'd probably had our best opportunities already. It was an incredible achievement and so deserved, especially as we'd missed out by small margins in the last few years. What a way to do it, breaking the record for the most points in the play-offs and holding off Club Brugge right until the end. It was really special to win nine and draw one of our last ten games. It was joy and elation for everyone involved.

This was Union's 12th title, but their first for 90 years. What does it mean to have added a new chapter to the club's story?
It's really cool to write your name in history. It does feel like the possible relaunch of Union as a major power in Belgian football because it's been so long. The cup win last year was nice, and more of a relief that we'd actually won something, but now we've finally put Union back on that titles board. Let's see if we can keep it going, cause a bit more trouble in the top flight and win some more titles. I think the club are hungry to keep improving.

Over the last five years, you've won promotion, reached the quarter-finals of the Europa League, won the Belgian Cup and now the Pro League title. Did you ever think this would be possible when you joined Union in 2020?
Absolutely not. It's been a ridiculous journey. Almost unbelievable. It was so far out of the scope of what Union had planned that no one would have thought it. It's been brilliant. We've achieved some really good things. It's been a real pleasure to have jumped on the bandwagon and helped the club get there. Next season will make Union the club I've served for the longest. Who knows, I might finish my career here.

What have been the most important factors behind Union's success?
It's down to the people in charge – the president, the sporting director and everyone else – who have built the club and the culture. They've managed to keep recruiting players with so much potential and turning them into gems. It's a selling club at the moment – the squad turnover must be so high in the last four years – but they've kept getting in players who are hungry. This year, we had a very humble group who worked hard for each other. There were no huge egos, which was nice. I think that's enabled guys to come in at different times and perform.

How much has the club changed in your time there?
The club hasn't changed, to be honest. They've stuck to their plan and their structure. They've probably spent a little bit more on players as time's gone on, because they've recouped a lot of money from selling players. Other than that, it's the same. The training ground isn't as lavish as maybe the Belgian title would have you believe. We don't train on the beautiful pitches that Club Brugge and Genk do. The club's still building and trying to improve. That's also been part of the success – people come here hungry to reach that next step. It's still not a big club in that sense, but that's the vision for the future. We've got a new training ground for next season, which is exciting.

Since returning to the Pro League in 2021, Union had twice finished the regular season in top spot but lost out on the title in the Champions' play-off. What made the difference this time?
Probably coming from behind. There's a lot less pressure when you're third at the beginning of the play-offs and you get given a ten per cent chance of winning the whole thing, compared to being at the top and being hunted by a couple of teams. When we missed one or two players through injury, guys who had been on the bench stepped up and produced some magical performances. They really took their opportunity. In previous seasons, some of our biggest stars hadn't performed in the play-offs and there was no one to step into their roles. We had more of a level playing field in the depth of our squad this year. That made everyone believe. We kept going and we did it.

You scored the winner at home to Genk in the play-off round. Could you talk us through your celebration?
At the start of every season, you have to do photo-shoots. Everybody lines up and you've got to pick a celebration. As a defender, you don't really have one in mind. When I got to the green screen, I'd been watching cricket recently, so I just thought I'd give it a cover drive. When I finally scored, I thought: "Okay, brilliant, I'll bring out my cover drive celebration." I could bat a little bit back in the day. At one stage, I was probably better at cricket than football. ➤

USG
lotto
16

Having lost out in the champions' play-off previously, Union benefited from it this time. As a player who's experienced both sides, what do you make of it?
I hate the play-offs. It's a ridiculous format. I understand why they do it, but not many leagues do. It's normally leagues where the viewership isn't as big, so they need to spice things up. These days it's all about television money. I think that was the main driver. It's unscripted drama and way more exciting for the neutral. This year obviously worked out for us. Genk were by far the strongest team in the regular season and then the pressure got to them. They crumbled. We finally learned how to manage the play-offs and timed our run. For me, coming from England, where the best team wins over the whole stretch of the season, that's obviously the better format.

Your former team-mate, Sebastien Pocognoli, led Union to the title as manager. What's he like to play for?
It was his first season as a head coach, so he's been learning on the go. It's been interesting to see from a player's perspective. There was a lot of pressure on him after the poor start we had. I think he dealt with that really well. He instilled a belief in every player that they were good enough to play. He backed a lot of the guys who weren't starting and put a lot of effort into making them feel part of the team and that paid off in the end, so he deserves a lot of credit. We'll see what happens over the summer because we're used to coaches spending a season here and then leaving.

Since Brighton chairman Tony Bloom bought the club in 2018, Union have specialised in developing young, talented but little-known players from all around the world. Which one has impressed you the most?
We've had some unbelievable

ABOVE: Cover drive...the defender celebrates scoring with a cricket stroke
BELOW: Champions...Burgess celebrates with the Belgian league trophy

players but, in terms of overall quality, [Kaoru] Mitoma was my favourite to watch. He made football look easy. The way he ran with the ball and just passed it into the back of the net gave me Thierry Henry vibes. He was ridiculous and the hardest to play against in training by a mile. There was just no stopping him – especially with my pace!

After arriving from Estonia last summer, Promise David scored 19 league goals for Union, including a brace on the final day. What have you made of his impact?
He came here almost looking like an amateur, to be honest, and finished the season as somebody who could go all the way and play in the Premier League because of his physical attributes and eye for goal. I was injured, so I watched his first appearance in the Belgian Super Cup and he was like a rabbit in the headlights. The intensity was a real shock to him. He wasn't as fit as he needed to be to play at this level, so he didn't make the European squad for the first half of the season. It was a crazy turnaround. He scored some great goals and some really important ones. I wouldn't be surprised to see him get a big move.

How excited are you about competing in the Champions League for the first time next season?
We've got the draw to look forward to on August 28. Everyone knows the date because we're so excited! It's ridiculous. I always watch the Champions League. When you're a kid, it's a dream to play in that competition. We're just hoping to avoid the teams we've already played in Europe, like Nice, Frankfurt and Leverkusen. As a player, you want a new challenge. You want to tick off new grounds and new experiences. If I could pick just one, it would be Barcelona. Other than West Ham, who I support, they're my favourite team. I'd love to play against them, but I wouldn't turn my nose up at Real Madrid either!

"I hate the play-offs. It's a ridiculous format"

You've enjoyed a lot of success with Union. How have you found life in Belgium away from the pitch?
It's been really nice. I like the lifestyle in Brussels. I'm really settled. I met my wife here and we've had a kid, so it feels like home for us. It's like a much smaller London – easier to get around, lots of different spots with different vibes, some really nice parks. It's a bit of an outdoor life. Everyone is on the terrace with a coffee or a beer. There are lots of different cultures coming together here. It's a melting pot and that's really fun to immerse yourself in.

Before joining Union, you spent five years at Portsmouth. How significant was that spell in establishing yourself as a professional footballer?
They were my best years as a footballer in England. I was very settled in Portsmouth and I loved the club. I had a really good relationship with the city and the fans, and I still do. We stopped the rot, got the first promotion and won a trophy at Wembley, so it was lovely. It helped me to develop in confidence and to progress as a player. After five years it was time to move on to another challenge, which has worked out well for me. I haven't been able to get back for a match as yet, but I'm looking forward to it.

You spent most of your time in England in League One and League Two, but you have impressed against top European teams since moving to Union. Why do you think that is?
I always believed I had the capability. I just didn't get that chance, unfortunately. In England, when you're at a good club in the lower divisions, it's not easy to move up unless you achieve promotion. We didn't quite get to the Championship with Portsmouth. As you get older, you become less of an asset for a bigger club to sign. That never happened for me. I've definitely got better with age, as most centre-halves do. The style that we play, with three at the back, really suits me. They've recruited really well for that system and I've slotted into it. A combination of all those factors has enabled me to play at this level, which I'm grateful for.

What would you say are the biggest differences between football in England and Belgium?
I always played in the lower leagues in England, so everything was a lot more direct. It was a battle, whereas here we try and build up a lot more. I also think the media pressure is a lot higher in England. There's a lot more scrutiny. Maybe it's just because I don't really read the Flemish or French press, so I don't see it, but it seems more relaxed here. I don't particularly miss English football. I'm happy where I am.

What does the future hold for Union?
Getting approval to develop a new stadium is the number one goal right now, which will help the club become sustainable without an injection of cash every year from the owners, or the pressure to sell players. That's really important and will help us continue to grow. If that happens, we might be able to hold onto players for longer and really change the dynamic of Union. We'll see.

Interview by Sean Cole

Key signing... Burgess during his first season in Belgium

JASON PUNCHEON

"British coaches think they can just come here and hit the ground running, but it's far more difficult"

The former Premier League midfielder sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his coaching career in Cyprus

Jason, you're remembered for playing in the Premier League for Crystal Palace, Southampton, Blackpool, QPR and Huddersfield Town, so how did you end up in Cyprus?
After playing for Huddersfield [in 2019], I didn't want to be away from my family again. At that stage of my career it wasn't about financial gain, it was about happiness. I could have gone to the Championship and played 46 games a season, playing Saturday-Tuesday, and been away from my family again. But the Cyprus opportunity came up and I thought it would be a good move, both professionally and from a family perspective. People automatically thought I was going for the money, for one last payday, but trust me, there was no money compared to what I was being offered back home.

You joined Pafos FC. Was it an easy transition from playing in England?
I arrived on the back foot having missed most of pre-season. I didn't sign until mid-August, meaning I only had two weeks to get myself up to speed. Being the big signing that I was, the coach was always going to put me in the team and, while I was doing extra work myself, coming into a new environment was still difficult when not fully fit. For the first six months, I had someone following me wherever I went on the pitch. When you're not properly up to speed fitness-wise, you can't get away with it, no matter who you are. Then there was the culture, the climate and the language barrier that was all new to me. COVID also hit in my first season, which didn't help, and everyone was saying: "He's not good enough, he's past it," but that gave me the drive to prove those people wrong the following season.

You went on to play regularly over the next two years, but Pafos didn't quite make the progress you'd hoped for...
I was attracted to the club because its owners had a vision to fight for the league title, which would then bring the chance to play in Europe, but we finished seventh and sixth in my two full seasons. I could still see the progress the club was making, both on and off the pitch in terms of infrastructure and playing staff. They went on to win the domestic cup in 2023-24 and last season they won the league title for the first time, meaning they'll now be playing in the Champions League. I had three fantastic years there before seeing out my playing career at Anorthosis Famagusta, which gave me the opportunity to play for a big Cypriot club with a big, passionate fanbase, and I learnt more Greek there, which was important.

You moved into coaching ahead of the 2023-24 season with Peyia 2014. How did that come about?
Cyprus has really looked after me and respected me because of the way I've always carried myself here, and I was given an opportunity to coach, which I don't think I would have got in England. Peyia were playing Second Division football, which is [a similar level to] League Two or the National League in England – but who is going to give Jason Puncheon his first coaching job at that level back home? I would have needed to start with the Under-18s, Under-21s at best, so first-team opportunities are very scarce in England, even more so for those from a BAME background. I've had to find my own coaching pathway but, because of the respect for me here, I've been given opportunities by people who don't discriminate, they see you for what you are.

Is it difficult for a British coach to come into the Cypriot league? Another former Palace player, Chris Coleman, lasted only 11 games last season at AEL, for instance...
British coaches think that because of their greater experience and knowledge in the game, they can just come here and hit the ground running, but it's far more difficult than that. If you don't understand the Cypriot culture and their way of thinking, then you will struggle. Like when the foreign coaches first started coming to England it was a culture shock for them on and off the pitch and it takes time to adapt, but you don't always have that time here as a coach. That's where I'm at an advantage, having lived here for some years now.

How difficult is it though, when you've played in the Premier League and you're now coaching players at a much lower level?
All coaches have a way they want to play, regardless of the players at their disposal, and I'm no different. Yes, you might have been working with a player who was a ten out of ten in the past, and now some players might be a three, but you stick to your principles. You have to adapt. You might have to take things more slowly, but you still want the same outcome. As long as you see progress, that's what's important. Players might not be able to do what you want them to do consistently over 90 minutes, but if it's sporadic and the frequency increases, then you know you're on the right lines and your message is getting across.

Last season you led a team called Akritas Chlorakas to promotion to the top tier. How satisfying was that?
It was difficult because I came into the club midway through the season and we had an unbalanced team, but we did enough to get over the line. We made some mistakes along the way, which is part of the learning process, but the good thing about this club moving forward now is that it has financial stability – which is not the case at every club here. The club has a clear vision to maintain its First Division status and now it comes down to my coaching quality and that of my staff to give ourselves a fighting chance of staying up, which is our only target next season. It won't be easy, given we're up against clubs with far bigger budgets and resources, but it's a challenge I'm looking forward to and one I will relish. Longer term, we want to build year on year, keep growing the club and keep getting stronger.

Finally, what's your longer-term coaching plan?
I'm not looking any further than keeping Akritas in the First Division and to build on that the following season. If I'm successful at doing that, then given the nature of football somebody will be looking at you. I do feel that whatever happens in the future Cyprus will now be my base. My family love their lives here and my kids see it as their home, so life is good right now.

Interview by Luke Nicoli

ALEXANDRE LAFITTE

"I have a team that is older than me, but it isn't a problem"

One of the youngest top-flight coaches in the world reflects on winning the Ivorian league title and looks ahead to the future

When you arrived at Stade Abidjan at the age of 25, you became the youngest manager in any top division in world football. Just over two years later, the club has just picked up its first league title since 1969. How do you explain this success?
It is an intense emotion because it had been 56 years since the club won the league. The season was long with the CAF Champions League, the national cup and the league. When I arrived in January 2023, the club was in the relegation zone and a few months prior had come up to the top division after a few years in the second tier. But Stade Abidjan is a historic club, the first Ivorian team to win the Champions League back in the 1960s.

I took the team in January 2023 and we stayed up. When I arrived, the team was second from bottom. We finished eighth. After that, we made a two-year plan, with a project to qualify for an African competition in two years. First we pulled off a feat by finishing second, and last season we did even better, finishing as champions. It shows a great progression throughout the journey. Our season was incredible because we had consistency. It was a very complete season.

How do you compete against 29-time Ivorian champions ASEC Mimosas?
Their budget is eight, nine times higher than ours. We kept a lot of the team from the previous season together, and we made good signings, but without blowing up our wage structure, by doing things intelligently. Our strength is collective. Our top scorer, a winger, has just seven goals. Only three outfield players out of 26 didn't score – that's quite incredible. I have lots of players with between four and five goals, so we weren't just carried by one player. Our strength was our ability to bring an intense game. The intensity in training, which was sometimes higher than in matches, meant that players have progressed, and when we get to the matches, we impose a tempo that is difficult for the opposition to handle.

Going back to your arrival at the club, how did the opportunity come about?
Opportunities arrive when you least expect but when you go looking for them, it is very difficult. I had first contact with Stade Abidjan in October 2022, but at that point it had been over two-and-a-half years since I had been looking for the chance to be a first-team manager. I had lots of opportunities that didn't come off for different reasons. I should have worked for a big club in England [Liverpool's Under-16s], to be their academy manager. With Brexit, I couldn't do that. I had an opportunity in Ghana a year before, but I didn't feel that it was the right project, so I turned it down.

Then everything just aligned. [Stade Abidjan] was the chance of a lifetime. You have the impression that my path has been quite linear, but there were so many failures before that, so many doubts and difficult moments, where I had left certain clubs thinking that I would join others, but at the last minute it didn't come off. I found myself unemployed. I know that there aren't any young French managers that manage in the top flight, and so I knew that, if I did succeed, I had everything to gain. As it is abnormal, I knew I would have visibility, and I would be able to gain a few years.

Has your age ever been an issue in the dressing room?
I have a team that, for the most part, is older than me, but it isn't a problem. The players still scan you, analyse you, so you have to be coherent in what you say, what you do. The most important thing is that the players think they can progress, that they know what is expected of them.

French managers often come to Africa later in their careers, but you've subverted the trend. Could you be a trailblazer?
I was inspired by the journey taken by Herve Renard, among others. The idea was that, if you do something here, it'll have an impact. Lots of managers contact me, saying that they want to do the same thing as me. The difficulty is that it is very hard, firstly getting a job and then staying in it. Most of the managers spend less than a year in the job. So it isn't an easy solution. Africa is hard, and there is an environment and a pressure that is very intense.

Your contract at Stade Abidjan is up this summer. What now?
The plan is to continue to progress. Will it be with Stade Abidjan or another team? I do not know. The inspiration is to do better, to play in the big competitions, so that could be in Europe or on another continent. I like challenges. I could stay at Stade Abidjan, but continuing the same or doing worse – because it will be difficult to do better – that is why we're looking around. If I have the chance to manage teams in the biggest leagues, it would be a challenge that I would take on. We've had contacts, but the problem today is in terms of the qualifications that I do not yet have [BPEF, UEFA Pro], which means that clubs either have to pay fines or I go to other intermediary leagues abroad. That is something we are looking at, as well as going to a first division side as an assistant, to finish my courses for one or two years. It isn't the priority option, though. We aren't closing any doors.

Interview by Luke Entwistle

Glenn Moore

Copa America Femenina

The battle to become the international queens of South American football kicks off in Ecuador on July 12

There will be more at stake than just the title when the Copa America Femenina kicks off in Ecuador in mid-July.

With the Women's World Cup coming to South America for the first time in 2027 with Brazil as hosts, many eyes will be assessing the level of interest the tournament evokes in the continent, and the development of the teams.

Beset by misogyny and severely underfunded, the women's game has struggled in South America, as highlighted in the 2023 World Cup qualifying play-off tournament when Chile lost 2-1 to Haiti and Paraguay succumbed 1-0 to Panama.

Brazil and Argentina subsequently crashed out in the group stage with just one win between them, leaving quarter-finalists Colombia as CONMEBOL's only last-16 representatives.

The prospect of playing at the 2027 World Cup, with four places potentially up for grabs besides hosts Brazil, should be a driver to raise interest and standards, but it is hard to remedy years of neglect overnight.

Brazil will be the clear favourites in Ecuador, having won eight of the previous nine tournaments and reached the Olympic final at Paris 2024. But that achievement was not without its setbacks – Brazil scraped through the group as a best third-placed finisher.

Copa contenders...Colombia's Linda Caicedo

Coach Arthur Elias is thus in a process of renewal, easing out old stalwarts, bringing in new talent, and honing a core he can build a World Cup challenge around.

The first part is easier said than done. Having retired from international football after the Olympics, Marta has unretired. Even at the age of 39, it is a brave coach who turns her down – not that Elias would want to. Marta is still performing at a high level for Orlando Pride in the NWSL and will be an inspirational figure in the squad besides her on-pitch impact.

The veteran was involved in the two recent wins over Japan, while among the scorers were two domestic-based teenagers, Dudinha and Jhonson, both born in 2005, by which time Marta was already a full Brazil international and UEFA Women's Cup winner.

It wasn't a baton-passing moment; not because Marta doesn't seem willing to let the baton go, but because it is already being carried by a core group of mid and late 20-somethings like Lorena, Kerolin, Angelina, Gabi Portilho and Yasmim, who Elias will be building the 2027 team around.

> Brazil will be the clear favourites in Ecuador, having won eight of the previous nine Copa America Femenina tournaments and reached the Olympic final at Paris 2024

The Japan victories followed an impressive post-Paris run, during which the United States, Australia and Colombia were also beaten. Those results boded well for 2027, as does the 33,325-strong crowd for the first encounter with Japan in Sao Paulo.

Not that all the World Cup preparation is going smoothly. The second match with Japan failed to fill three-quarters of a 12,000-capacity stadium, albeit that was played on the fringe of the Sao Paulo commuter belt. Brazil recently reduced the number of World Cup 2027 venues to eight, cutting the most isolated venues – Manaus in the Amazon and Cuiaba on the edge of the Pantanal wetlands. This seems sensible given that the tournament is expected to be financed by private investment, while the national league is struggling to attract sponsors.

In the meantime, Brazil are expected to top Group B this summer. Colombia, spearheaded by Real Madrid's Linda Caicedo and Chelsea's Mayra Ramirez, are likely to join them in reaching the semi-finals.

Argentina, having lost their No.10 Dalila Ippolito through injury, are slight favourites to win the comparatively open Group A. Chile were hit hard by the retirement of goalkeeper Christiane Endler, Uruguay are improving, while Ecuador will have the advantage of familiarity with the altitude.

All the matches will be played in Quito whose elevation of 2,850m (9,350ft) will test players, and not just the many who are effectively part-time – a number of Colombia's key players are well into their 30s.

Assuming the latter manage the altitude, a second successive Brazil-Colombia final is probable, which would earn both teams a place at the 2028 LA Olympics.

THE DRAW

2025 COPA AMERICA FEMENINA

July 12-August 2, Ecuador

GROUP A

Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Peru

GROUP B

Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, Venezuela, Bolivia

Top two from each group qualify for the semi-finals

Round-up

Favourites and holders...Brazil have won the last four editions

WOMEN'S AFCON FINALLY BEGINS

The 2024 Women's Africa Cup of Nations belatedly got underway on July 5. Not only did qualification end in 2023, qualification for the 2026 WAFCON has already started. This means Botswana and Tunisia are in the odd position of competing at this tournament while knowing they are already knocked out of the next one.

The hosts, as in 2022 and 2026, are Morocco, who currently appear to be the only African nation keen to stage women's competitions. They also hosted the 2022 and 2024 African Champions Leagues, which are held as mini-tournaments in a central venue. This is part of a general investment in the sport for men and women, strongly backed by King Mohammed VI, providing excellent training facilities and funding professional clubs.

Morocco's commitment has been rewarded, too. The national team reached the 2022 WAFCON final while Moroccan clubs have featured in the last three Champions League finals, with AS FAR winning in 2022.

Jorge Vilda, who led Spain to World Cup success before leaving in the wake of the scandal that brought down federation boss Luis Rubiales, is Morocco's coach. His appointment underscores their desire to succeed.

The main contenders, besides the Atlas Lionesses, are defending champions South Africa, 11-time winners Nigeria, and a Zambia team led by NWSL stars Barbra Banda of Orlando Pride and Bay FC's Racheal Kundananji, the world's second most-expensive women's player.

That quartet represented Africa at the 2023 World Cup with each winning at least one match. All but Zambia, whose attacking potency is undone by a porous defence, reached the knockout stages.

There are no debutants but three notable absentees. Two-time winners Equatorial Guinea, four-time finalists Cameroon and Ivory Coast all missed out – though the latter two are both seeded in 2026 qualifying.

DR Congo return for the first time since 2012 while Tanzania have only previously appeared once, in 2010, losing all three matches.

With only three groups, the top two go through, joined by the best two third-place teams. Morocco and Zambia are favoured to emerge from Group A, Nigeria and Algeria, managed by former Lyon, OL Reign and PSG coach Farid Benstiti, from Group B, and South Africa and Ghana from Group C. Mali and DR Congo or Senegal are most likely to make up the last eight.

Africa Cup of Nations holders...South Africa won the continental tournament in 2022 in Morocco

The final will be on July 26 in Rabat. Morocco, aided by a generous draw, should be in it as long as they win their group, with Nigeria or South Africa the probable opponents.

2024 WAFCON GROUP DRAW

Group A Morocco, Zambia, Senegal, DR Congo
Group B Nigeria, Tunisia, Algeria, Botswana
Group C South Africa, Ghana, Mali, Tanzania
Top two and two best third-place teams qualify for the quarter-finals

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE SEMI-FINALS SET

Holders Spain will face Sweden in the UEFA Nations League semi-finals after coming from behind to beat England to qualify. In October's other semi-final, at a hub venue to be decided, Germany will play France.

Three of the quartet were also in the inaugural final four, Sweden replacing Netherlands as the only change.

Match winner...Claudia Pina celebrates scoring a brace against England in Nations League Group A3

RASH OF RETIREMENTS

Northern Ireland's record scorer Rachel Furness announced her retirement from the game after scoring 38 goals in 95 games for her country. Her news quickly followed that of centre-backs Rachel Corsie, who won 154 caps for Scotland, and Louise Quinn, who made 121 appearances for the Republic of Ireland. Elsewhere, England attacking midfielder Fran Kirby retired from international football after being told she would only be on standby for Euro 2025.

GIRALDEZ SWAPS KANG CLUBS

Washington Spirit coach Jonatan Giraldez is set to return to Europe to lead OL Lyonnes, another club in Michele Kang's stable, in the coming season. The Spaniard was previously at Barcelona where he twice won the Champions League.

Europe return... Jonatan Giraldez

In another big move involving the French champions, they announced the signing of national team star striker Marie-Antoinette Katoto from rivals Paris Saint-Germain.

MARINERS WIN LEAGUE DOWN UNDER BUT LOSE COACH

Central Coast Mariners, in their maiden Grand Final, beat Melbourne Victory on penalties after a 1-1 draw to win Australia's A-League. The Mariners finished 21 points behind regular season winners Melbourne City, but beat them with a 121st-minute second-leg goal in the play-off semi-final.

Mariners' English-born coach Emily Husband, who arrived in Australia as a backpacker on a working visa in 2016, then quit to become new Australia boss Joe Montemurro's assistant.

SPURS AXE SWEDE

Tottenham sacked Robert Vilahamn after a poor WSL season. The Swede led the club to the 2024 FA Cup final in his inaugural campaign.

WSL SET FOR EXPANSION

The Women's Super League has announced that it will be expanding from 12 to 14 teams starting from the 2026-27 season. There will be more news on that, alongside a detailed overview of the current state of the women's domestic game in England, in next month's issue.

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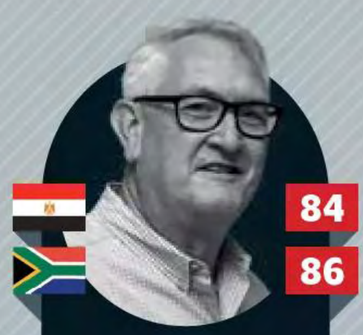

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South America

TIM VICKERY

Familiar story in Copa Libertadores

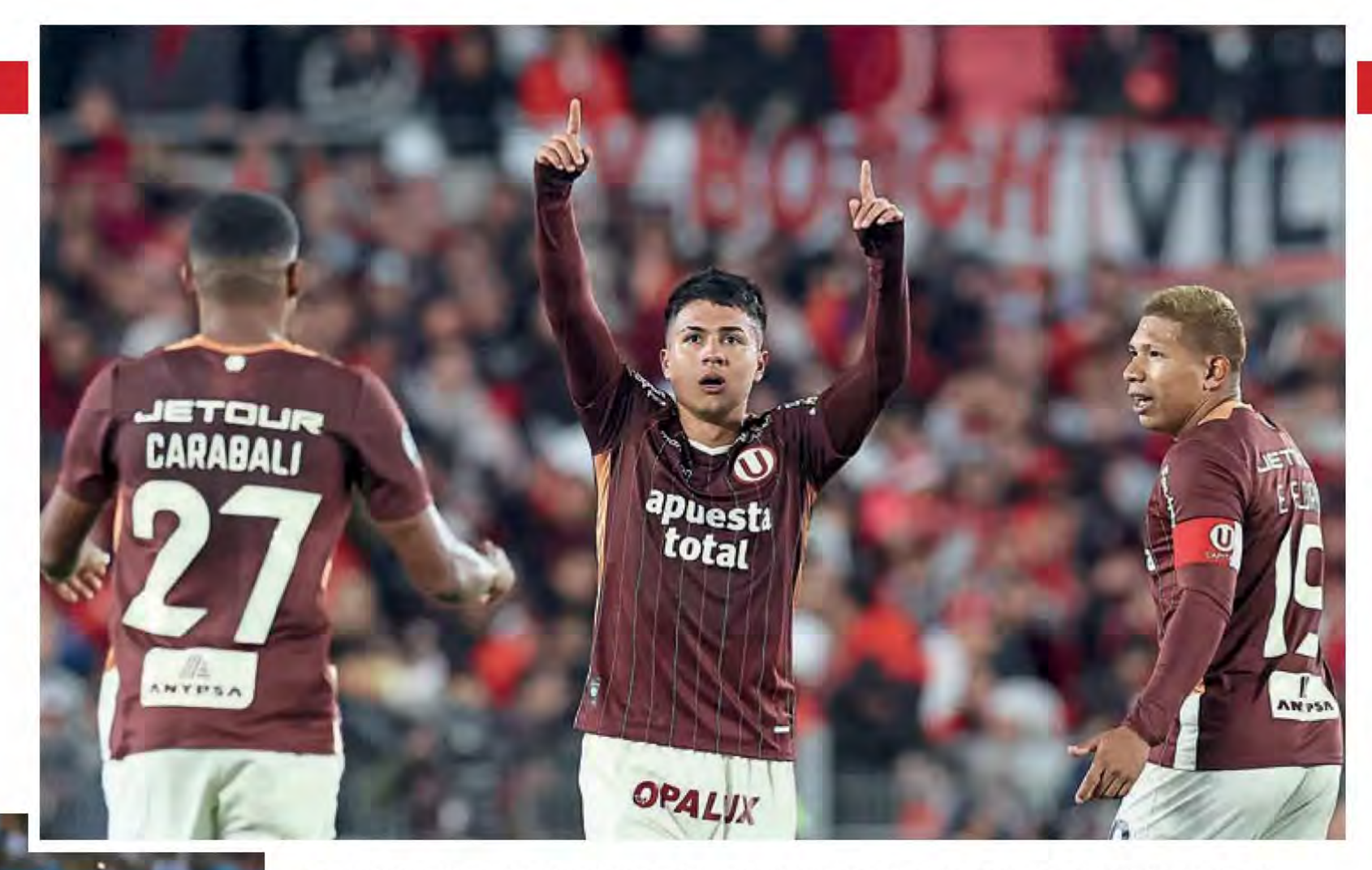
Brazilian teams continue to dominate South America's elite continental club competition as group stage concludes

Has the Copa Libertadores become too predictable? It is a fair criticism given the six consecutive Brazilian wins, an unprecedented period of domination by one country. At the end of this year's group phase, with 16 teams eliminated and 16 going through to the knockout stages, there were very few surprises.

One does stand out, though. Universitario became the first Peruvian side to make it out of the group stage since 2013, grinding their way past two Ecuadorian teams, Independiente del Valle and Barcelona, with a respectable recent track record in the competition.

That aside, the accusation of predictability would appear to be confirmed by a glance at the list of qualifiers. But the way it happened was not as straightforward as might have been expected.

True, Palmeiras won all of their matches – the only team to do so – and Sao Paulo coasted through with



Surprise knockout-round qualifiers...Peruvian champions Universitario came second in Group B

Dominant...Brazilians Palmeiras won all six of their group games

scarcely a bump along the way. But life was not easy for all the Brazilian clubs. Reigning champions Botafogo, for example, needing to win their last game, had a man sent off early in the match before digging themselves out of a hole.

Rio neighbours Flamengo had an even closer flirt with catastrophe. The task appeared straightforward enough; in their final group match, they had to win at home to Venezuela's Deportivo Tachira, who had lost all of their games. Flamengo made hard work of breaking them down, and their 1-0 lead almost disastrously evaporated with nearly the last kick, when goalkeeper Agustin Rossi made a brave point-blank block to save his side from humiliating elimination.

Fortaleza's route to the last 16 was hardly convincing either. They came second in their group, two points ahead of Colombia's Atletico Bucaramanga – after having two points handed to them. Their match away to Chile's Colo-Colo was abandoned with 20 minutes to go because of crowd trouble – two fans were tragically killed outside the ground. On the field, the game was goalless, and Fortaleza barely threatened, but they were later awarded a 3-0 win.

One Brazilian team fell at the group stage. Bahia fought their way through the qualifiers, and found themselves in the strongest group. Colombia's Atletico Nacional, with their best team since winning the trophy in 2016, grabbed one of the slots. The other came down to a duel between Bahia and compatriots Internacional, who came from behind to win the vital clash 2-1 thanks to a late goal by Colombia striker Rafael Borre.

In this period of Brazilian domination, Argentina is the only other country to get teams through to the final, and four of the country's clubs are still alive to fight for glory in 2025 after topping their groups. River Plate were one of only three sides to make it through unbeaten, but were held to a draw in half of their games. Racing qualified in comfort. Velez Sarsfield threw off dismal domestic form to qualify, and much the same applies to Estudiantes. Eliminated early were Talleres, a major disappointment, and debutants Central Cordoba, who can consider themselves unlucky – their total of 11 points was better than five of the sides who made the cut for the knockout rounds.

The accusation of predictability would appear to be confirmed by a glance at the list of qualifiers

Brazil and Argentina, then, have ten of the last 16. Peru and Colombia, as we have seen, both have a team each left in the competition. Five-time winners Penarol of Uruguay have a wonderful tradition in the competition, mostly long in the past – their last title was back in 1987. They were surprise semi-finalists last year, and are still alive this time.

After a bad 2024, both Paraguay and Ecuador have made their presence felt once more. These two countries have consistently punched above their weight in recent times, and will aim to do so in the knockout rounds. Ecuador's LDU, or Liga of Quito, topped their group, while Paraguay still have two representatives. Three-time Copa winners Olimpia were a disappointment (joining Colo-Colo of Chile and Nacional of Uruguay as former champions eliminated in the group phase), but Libertad and Cerro Porteno remain. This is the sixth time in eight years that Paraguay has provided at least two of the last 16.

For three countries, the 2025 Copa Libertadores came to an early end. Universidad de Chile came close, but their last-day defeat condemned the nation to its fourth washout in five years. Bolivia's teams also fell, as did the Venezuelan pair. True, many of the defeats were narrow, but between them Carabobo and Deportivo Tachira could only manage one draw and six goals in a combined total of 12 games. It was Venezuela's eighth consecutive washout, with little sign of any imminent change in fortunes.

Flirting with catastrophe... Flamengo nervily saw off Venezuela's Deportivo Tachira

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

Platense make history

Minnows win their first-ever major trophy in Argentina's Apertura

Argentina's 2025 Apertura ended in celebrations that were 120 years in the making. The perennial underdogs Platense won their first-ever major trophy, thanks to a brilliant goal from Guido Mainero in the final against Huracan.

Boasting less than 10,000 members, Platense are nicknamed *El Calamar* (The Squid); the pitch they used to play their games on would regularly flood, leading a journalist to say the players manoeuvred through the mud "like squid in their ink."

In a country where many clubs pride themselves on developing world-class talent, Platense's biggest claim is perhaps to have handed future world and European champion David Trezeguet his professional debut at the age of 16. Not that the connection was long-lasting – after just five games, the Franco-Argentine centre-forward moved to France in the mid-1990s to embark on his successful career, starting with Monaco.

Trezeguet's glittering career contrasted to Platense's fortunes. The club spent over two decades in the lower divisions before finally returning to the top flight in 2021.

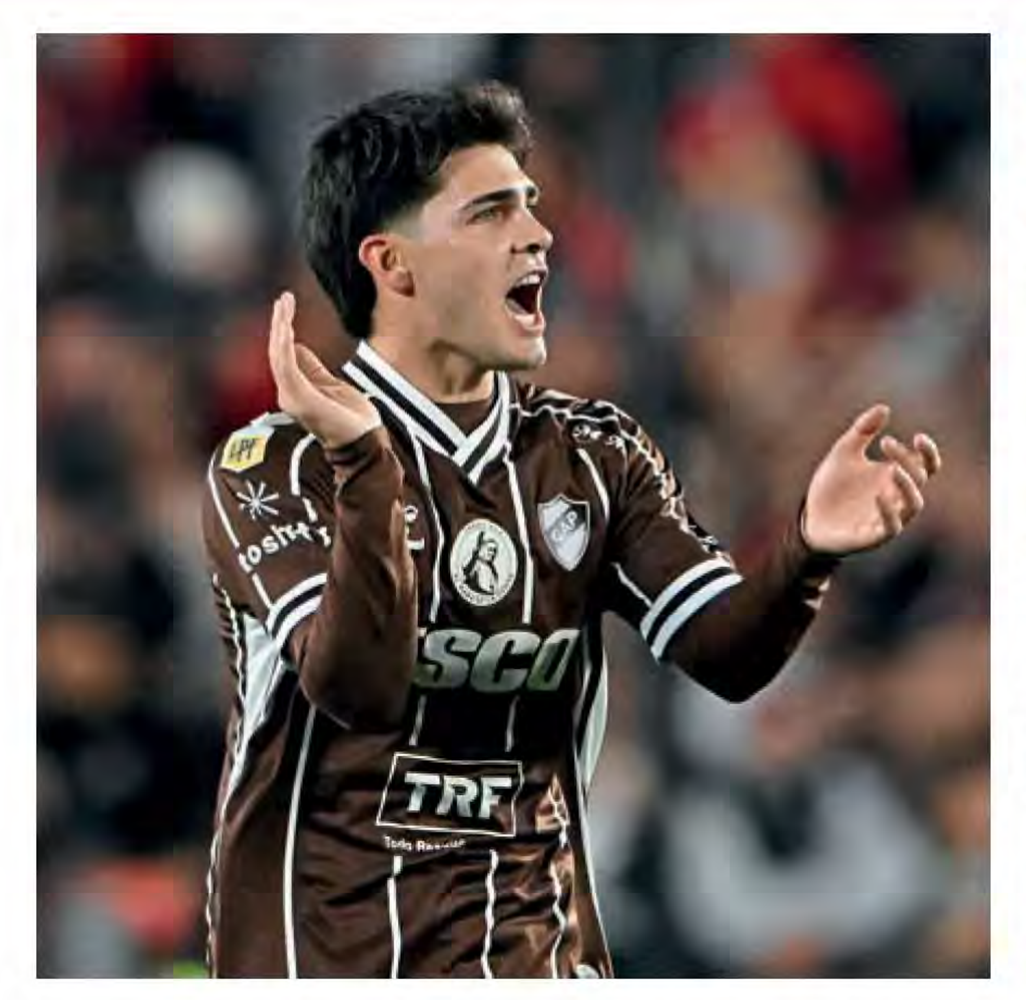
Other than a run to the final of the 2023 Copa de la Liga, when they lost to Rosario Central, there has been little to cheer for the *Calamar's* long-suffering supporters. That was until this year, when they emerged as giant-killers – and champions.

The format of this year's domestic competitions is group phases followed by knockout rounds. On their way to the final, Platense saw off three of Argentina's "*grandes*".

In the round of 16, they defeated Racing Club, who were more focused on the Copa Libertadores having won last year's Sudamericana.

Next came River Plate. After a series of controversial refereeing

Apertura champions ...Platense make history



Crucial goal... attacking midfielder Vicente Taborda celebrates scoring against River Plate

Management duo ... Favio Orsi and Sergio Gomez

decisions, the *Millonarios* won a late penalty that levelled the match and took the game to a penalty shootout. As television cameras zoomed in during the coin toss, captain Ignacio Vazquez refused to make eye contact with the referee or River's captain Franco Armani. It was a defiant act, an "us-against-them" moment.

Despite the raucous atmosphere at the Monumental, Platense profited from River's miserable record in penalty shootouts (eight consecutive defeats) to set up a semi-final against San Lorenzo. One more 1-0 win took Platense to the final versus Huracan.

It was a final between two clubs with little history of silverware. *El Globo*, The Balloon, were hoping to lift their first title since Cesar Luis Menotti led the club to success in 1973. Since then, Huracan had twice lost titles on the final matchday: in 2009, with the team led by a brilliant young Javier Pastore, and again in 2024.

> "We're just a group of kids who never stopped fighting"
>
> Platense's final hero Guido Mainero

Thousands of supporters from both sides made the journey to Santiago del Estero in northern Argentina for the final, where journeyman forward Guido Mainero settled the title with a brilliant half-volley. "We're just a group of kids who never stopped fighting," said the club hero.

From Vazquez's leadership in defence, and crucial goals from midfielder Vicente Taborda and Mainero, Platense were a team built on work ethic and discipline. "We are champions because we showed humility and willingness to sacrifice," said head coach Sergio Gomez, who made his professional debut at Platense years ago. "Everyone did their part. We had the beautiful responsibility of making history."

Gomez was one half of the coaching duo in Platense's dugout. Together with Favio Orsi, they became the first joint-coaches to win the Argentine league title. Gomez and Orsi began working together in Argentine football's fourth tier well over a decade ago and their achievement is no less remarkable than the club's itself. Platense have now secured qualification for the 2026 Copa Libertadores, which will be their first experience on South American football's biggest stage.

The euphoria, however, was short lived. Just ten days after winning the title, Orsi and Gomez stepped down. "We gave everything," they said, citing burnout.

Their departure was the last in a long line of managerial changes so far this year, with more than half of Argentina's first division club's changing their head coaches.

The standout case was at Boca Juniors, where the former academy graduate Fernando Gago lasted just six months. He failed to navigate the qualifying phase of the Copa Libertadores, not even managing the consolation prize of qualifying for the continent's second competition, the Copa Sudamericana. As performances and results wavered in the Apertura, defeat in the *Superclasico* to River Plate was the final straw.

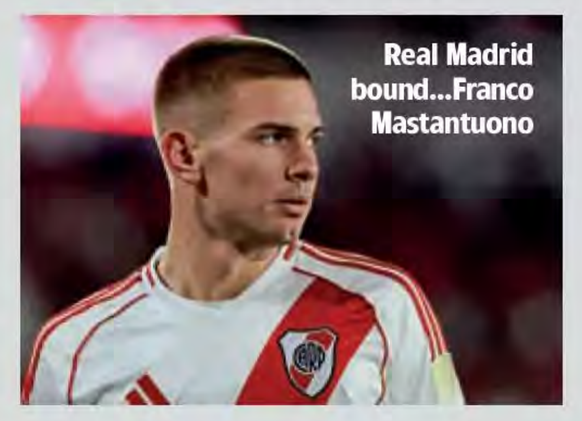
While fans turned on club hero and president Juan Roman Riquelme, the club turned – for a third time – to Miguel Angel Russo, the last coach to take Boca Juniors to Libertadores success in 2007.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Vicente Taborda
(Platense)
The champions' top goalscorer has been at Boca Juniors from the age of nine, and played for them in the 2023 Copa Libertadores final, but has twice been loaned out to Platense, where he was instrumental from attacking midfield in the title win.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Sergio Gomez & Favio Orsi
(Platense)
"Platense is a club of opportunities" Gomez would say to his players, and so it would prove for this curious case of joint-coaches who made history by winning the Argentine first division title on limited resources.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Franco Mastantuono
(River Plate)
The latest prodigy to emerge from Argentine football. The attacking midfielder made his debut for the national team after his form for River Plate, which included seven goals and four assists in 19 games this year, and agreed an Argentine record €63m move to Real Madrid.



Real Madrid bound...Franco Mastantuono

Australia

SIMON HILL

Melbourne City back on top Down Under

City see off local rivals Melbourne Victory in Grand Final to seal A-League title

Melbourne City finally shook off their tag of being the "nearly men" to claim a second A-League Championship – and first since 2021 – at the expense of their bitter rivals, Melbourne Victory.

City prevailed in an ugly Grand Final, settled by an early goal scored by Israeli import Yonatan Cohen. The remaining 80 minutes were something of an anti-climax, punctured only by a series of niggly fouls, a bloodied-nose to the man of the match, Mat Leckie, and two further City chances, which could have made the scoreline even more emphatic.

City were appearing in their fifth Grand Final in six seasons, but had won only once previously, and any home advantage they might have earned was cancelled out by the presence of Victory's massive supporter base. But a dogged defensive display secured a 13th clean sheet of the season and the trophy in front of a new AAMI Park record crowd of 29,902.

City boss Aurelio Vidmar deserves huge credit for steering a team beset by injuries to the trophy, while Victory, who lost a third consecutive major final (including the 2024 Grand Final and Australia Cup), were left to ponder whether the absence of Socceroos winger Nishan Velupillay through injury fatally blunted their attack.

Arthur Diles, however, did well to guide them to the decider after only picking up the reins mid-season from Patrick Kisnorbo, who quit after just a few months to take up a post with Yokohama F. Marinos in Japan.

A-League champions ...Melbourne City captain Aziz Behich lifts the trophy

Match winner... Yonatan Cohen celebrates after scoring in the Grand Final

A-League new boys Auckland FC finished top of the regular season league table to be named Premiers in their inaugural season. Superbly competitive under serial winner Steve Corica, the New Zealanders breezed to the finish line, losing only three times, but then fell unexpectedly in the play-off semi-finals to Victory. Still, with crowds averaging around 15,000 and a new stadium in the offing, they have been a very welcome addition to the competition.

City accounted for Western United in the other semi-final. John Aloisi's young team were the surprise packages, with 23-year-old striker Noah Botic banging in 16 goals ahead of a proposed move to Europe. German Bundesliga outfit St Pauli are said to be the frontrunners for his signature.

Western Sydney Wanderers had a much better campaign, securing finals football for only the second time since 2017, but they fell at the first hurdle to Melbourne Victory. Consolation was found in the form of Nicolas Milanovic, who won the Johnny Warren Medal as the league's best player and now heads to Europe to begin a new career with Aberdeen.

Adelaide United scraped into the finals thanks to Sydney FC's late stumble, but the Reds couldn't send departing head coach, Carl Veart, out as a winner. They fell in the Elimination Final to Western United, all without top goalscorer Archie Goodwin, who succumbed to yet another injury. Airton Andrioli takes over in the hot seat for 2025-26.

City were appearing in their fifth Grand Final in six seasons, but had won only once previously

Sydney FC were the biggest underachievers. A squad packed full of talent, including former Brazil winger Douglas Costa, failed to make the finals, and they were also surprisingly beaten in the semi-finals of the AFC Champions League Two – bowing out over two legs to Singaporean outfit, Lion City Sailors.

Macarthur were second in January, and had the Australia Cup already in the bag. But a mid-season fire sale saw them stripped of some of their best attacking talents. Despite a late rally, they couldn't bridge the gap.

Newcastle Jets made incremental progress under Robbie Stanton, with Eli Adams and Lachlan Rose forging a good strike partnership, but the finals eluded them once again. Stanton then quit to take up a role alongside former Socceroos boss Graham Arnold in Iraq, with former Australia defender Mark Milligan appointed for next season.

Central Coast Mariners were defending back-to-back champions, but never found any rhythm after another off-season when they lost half of their title-winning team.

Wellington Phoenix, the Mariners' nearest challengers in 2023-24, endured a similar fate, with only the form of the evergreen Kosta Barbarouses – who finished with double figures for goals – and the new Kiwi Derby providing any real excitement for the Phoenix fanbase.

Brisbane Roar and Perth Glory battled it out for the wooden spoon all season. In the end, Brisbane pulled clear, though it wasn't enough to save Ruben Zadkovich's job, with Michael Valkanis appointed as his replacement.

David Zdrilic gets another chance at Perth, for whom the glory days seem a long way off, on the back of consecutive bottom-place finishes.

More generally the game's finances are once again a concern, and the APL (which runs the league) has imposed a hard salary cap of AU$3 million as of the 2026-27 campaign, with a AU$3.5m hard cap "trial" starting from next season to give clubs time to adjust – a move that already has them at loggerheads with the PFA, the Players' Union.

Aberdeen-bound ...Western Sydney Wanderers' Nicolas Milanovic was named Player of the Season

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Nicolas Milanovic
(Western Sydney Wanderers)
Twelve goals and some dazzling displays earned the 23-year-old winger a Socceroos call-up and a summer move to Europe.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Steve Corica
(Auckland FC)
Built a new club from scratch to take out the Premiership in front of big crowds – New Zealand's first-ever trophy in the Australian national leagues.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Dylan Leonard
(Western United)
At just 17, the tough central defender (a boyhood Celtic fan) emerged as one of the league's best defenders. An overseas career surely awaits.

Egypt

MARK GLEESON

Al Ahly still rule in Egypt

But league runners-up Pyramids are contesting the Egyptian title in the Court of Arbitration for Sport

Al Ahly won the Egyptian Premier League title for the third time in a row, keeping up an endless run of trophy success. But this record-extending 45th crown was clouded in controversy and is being contested.

They finished two points above Pyramids, the new force in the Egyptian game whose rapid rise to prominence was crowned with a first-ever African Champions League trophy against expectation in June.

Only days earlier, however, Al Ahly made sure of the league title after a three-point deduction was rescinded on appeal.

Ahly failed to turn up for their much-anticipated derby against Zamalek in March when their request to have a foreign referee handle the match was rejected.

Referees from Europe, and even elsewhere in Africa, have often been used in past Cairo derbies as both clubs have long asserted that local officials show bias. It is more of a conspiracy theory than fact, but there is always an undercurrent of subterfuge in Egyptian football.

Referee Mohamed Bassyouni, along with the Zamalek team, were at Cairo International Stadium on time for the fixture, which was then abandoned 15 minutes after the scheduled kick-off time due to Ahly's absence.

The Egyptian Premier League's competitions committee awarded Zamalek a 3-0 win and docked Ahly an additional three points, plus ordered the club to compensate for financial losses.

But Ahly appealed the decision, asking instead that the derby be replayed. Although the forfeited result remained imposed, Ahly's additional three-point deduction was rescinded.

Egyptian champions... Al Ahly players celebrate with the trophy

Review

Champions of Africa...Pyramids are contesting the Egyptian title

This was all decided on the eve of the last round of the season and was enough to keep Al Ahly on top. They finished their campaign with six successive victories and took the title after a 6-0 thrashing of Pharco on the final matchday.

That was in midweek ahead of the Champions League final, with Pyramids forced to finish their league campaign at the same time despite asking for a postponement so that they could prepare for the second leg of the final against South Africa's Mamelodi Sundowns.

Pyramids coach Krunoslav Jurcic was incensed that he had to play a match so close to the Champions League final and fielded his reserves, although still won 5-1 against Ceramica Cleopatra.

Both Pyramids and Zamalek have taken the decision to reduce Ahly's sanction to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), although no date has been set for a hearing at the time of writing.

Ahly's season was far from convincing and there was an immediate sacking for coach Marcel Koller when they were eliminated from the Champions League in April, still six games from the end of the domestic league season.

Koller, the former Switzerland international and one-time Austria coach, was sent packing after Ahly lost on away goals to Sundowns in their semi-final tie, giving away an unlucky own goal in the last minute. Even given a long history of knee-jerk reactions to unfavourable results, this was rather extreme. But after almost three seasons at the club, Koller was coming to the end of his stay anyway. He was replaced by the Spaniard Jose Riveiro, who had made his name with Orlando Pirates of South Africa and beaten Ahly in Cairo in the group phase of this season's Champions League.

Zamalek put some gloss on another disappointing campaign as they won the Egyptian Cup, edging out Pyramids after 20 kicks in the post-match penalty shootout to prevail 8-7.

Pyramids were hoping to add another trophy just four days after Champions League success and took a first-half lead when Ahmed Atef headed home a cross from Walid El Karti.

Zamalek, who went through three different head coaches during the season, equalised in the 78th minute as substitute Nasser Mansi latched onto a long pass and scored.

Al Ahly made sure of the league title after a three-point deduction was rescinded on appeal

The match went into extra-time then penalties, where Zamalek were presented with three separate chances to win the cup. Finally, after Pyramids captain Ali Gabr missed with the 19th kick of the shootout, former Egypt forward Mahmoud Shikabala made it third time lucky for Zamalek.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Emam Ashour
(Al Ahly)
A mainstay in midfield for Ahly throughout the season, the Egypt international topped it off by emerging as the league's leading scorer with 13 goals.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Krunoslav Jurcic
(Pyramids)
The ex-Croatia international is like a caged tiger pitchside, cajoling his players at every turn with passionate energy.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Ahmed Atef
(Pyramids)
After spending the two previous seasons out on loan, the winger returned to play an important role for the African champions, proving a force on the right of their attack.

It was Zamalek's 29th success in the cup – ten behind record winners Ahly – and comes more than a century after their first back in 1922.

This was the first season with a new league format. The 18 teams played a single round of matches and then split into two groups, with the top nine teams then playing each other for the championship and the bottom nine battling to avoid relegation. It was decided to cut the number of relegated teams from three to two, but relegation was later cancelled altogether. Four teams have been promoted for next season, giving a total of 22 top-flight teams in the 2025-26 campaign.

Shootout drama...Zamalek players celebrate winning the Egyptian Cup against Pyramids on penalties

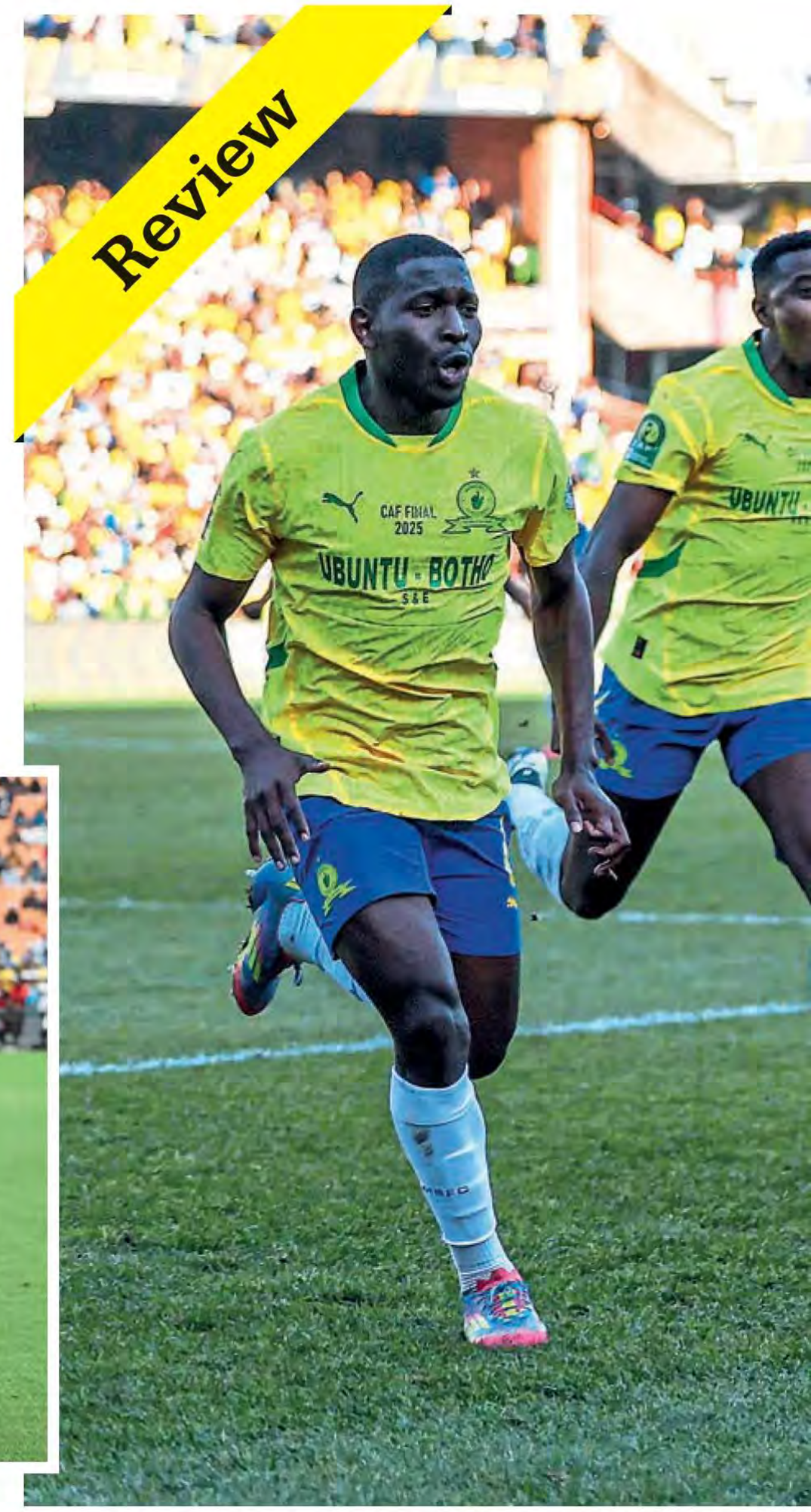
South Africa

MARK GLEESON

Sundowns settle for South African title

Mamelodi Sundowns left wanting more despite retaining their Premiership crown for the eighth successive season

South Africa's top two...Mamelodi Sundowns finished 12 points clear of runners-up Orlando Pirates



South African champions... but Mamelodi Sundowns missed out on African Champions League glory

While Mamelodi Sundowns' fell short of their Holy Grail once again by missing out on the African Champions League, their domestic dominance continued uninterrupted.

Defeat for the Pretoria-based club, owned by Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Patrice Motsepe and his family, against Pyramids of Egypt in the Champions League final was a major blow that took much of the gloss off an eighth successive South African championship.

Sundowns won by 12 points with Orlando Pirates in second spot for the third year in a row. The previous season it was 23 points, while in 2023 the difference between first and second was 16 points.

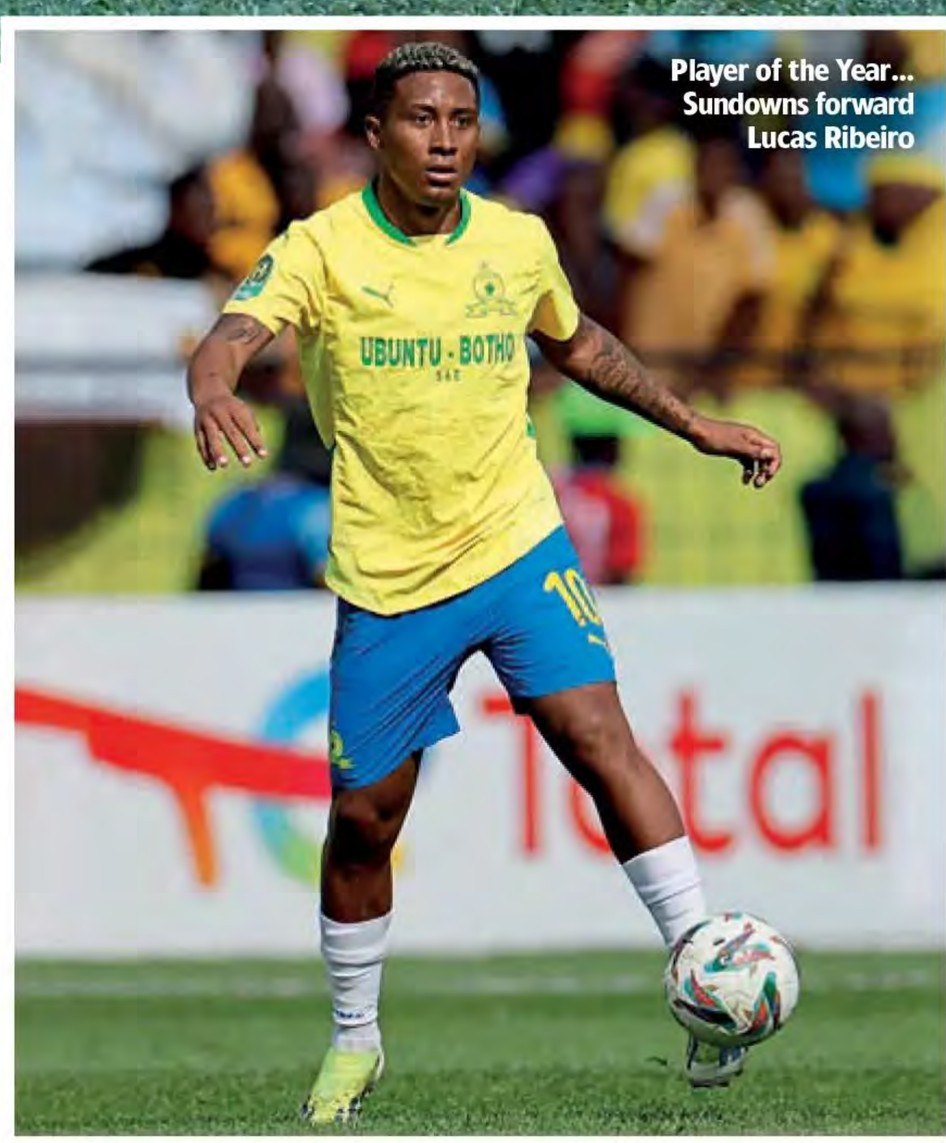
Sundowns' title came despite a managerial change in December, when Manqoba Mngqithi was removed and Miguel Cardoso took over. The hope was that the Portuguese coach would lead them to better Champions League performances, but whether he has made much of a difference compared to his South African predecessors is the subject of some debate. His detractors say he sacrificed their dominant attacking play for a more cautious approach that, while getting them to the Champions League final, has left the team a less attractive proposition to watch.

But after three successive quarter-final exits, followed by back-to-back semi-final defeats in 2023 and 2024, Sundowns finally reached the final. There, the fatigue of a long 54-match season caught up with them as they lost 3-2 on aggregate.

Brazilian attacker Lucas Ribeiro was the domestic scene's outstanding performer and league's top scorer, although in all competitions his striker partner Iqraam Rayners was top marksman with 21. The diminutive Chilean midfielder Marcelo Allende was also a key player along with South Africa international Teboho Mokoena in midfield, while right-back Khuliso Mudau was the best of several unsung heroes elsewhere on the field.

That Sundowns supply up to eight starters for South Africa, who are well placed for World Cup qualification, is testimony to the ability of billionaire Motsepe to buy the best talent available and why other clubs are but a support act in the Premier Soccer League.

There were hopes that Pirates might prove more competitive, and they won the first knockout trophy



Player of the Year... Sundowns forward Lucas Ribeiro

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Lucas Ribeiro
(Mamelodi Sundowns)
The Brazilian import proved the master conductor at Sundowns, linking play and orchestrating attacks, while still finding the time to finish as the league's top scorer with 16 goals.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Mohau Nkota
(Orlando Pirates)
Orlando Pirates had no hesitation in fielding talented youngsters in 2024-25, none more impressive than 20-year-old winger Nkota, who made his senior debut for South Africa in a friendly against Tanzania in June.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Steve Barker
(Stellenbosch)
The longest-serving coach in the league since promoting Stellenbosch to the top flight in 2019, Barker has steadily improved his club every season. A strong debut in African club competition was more evidence of his thorough work.

of the season, the MTN8, which is contested by the top eight from the previous league campaign.

Sundowns got to the final of the League Cup in November but were stunned by newcomers Magesi, who came from behind to win 2-1 in a fairy-tale upset.

Kaizer Chiefs remain the club with the most fans countrywide but have been in decline. In 2023-24 they endured their worst-ever season, finishing tenth, and responded by hiring Nasreddine Nabi as head coach. The Tunisian arrived with an unprecedented five assistant coaches to try to lift them out of the doldrums and broke a decade-long trophy drought by winning the national cup in May, defeating Soweto arch-rivals Pirates 2-1 in the final.

Other clubs are but a support act in the Premier Soccer League

It was a success greeted with relief more than jubilation after a fortuitous victory at the end of another unconvincing league season, where they finished ninth.

Stellenbosch, from the small town in the Cape winelands, finished in third place for a second successive campaign and also reached the semi-finals of the African Confederation Cup on their debut in continental competition, losing to eventual tournament runners-up Simba of Tanzania. Their coach Steve Barker brought them up from the second tier back in 2019 and remains in charge.

One dampener for the league was the expulsion from the top flight of Royal AM who, after 11 games, were stopped from taking part in Premier Soccer League matches. The South Africa Revenue Services' curator sought to sell the club but could not find a buyer and, after several months, the league expelled the club, expunging their results.

North America

JAMES NALTON

Leagues Cup gets a makeover for 2025

Next edition of competition for MLS and Liga MX teams will see more cross-border clashes and a new format

Preview

CONCACAF champions... Cruz Azul will be among the top contenders after claiming continental glory in June

The tournament that pits the two highest-profile leagues in North America against each other has been tweaked once again for 2025, retaining some of the format introduced in 2023 but becoming more refined.

The latest rejig of the Leagues Cup sees the annual competition kick-off with a league phase not dissimilar to the one now used in the UEFA Champions League, except with two separate tables – one for Major League Soccer teams and another for those from Liga MX. After every team has played three games, the top four from each of these 18-team leagues will qualify for the knockout stage.

However, although teams will be measured against fellow domestic foes in the table, this will not be the case on the pitch.

The new format, which sees a reduction in the number of MLS teams entering the tournament, has been altered to create more MLS v Liga MX match-ups. In fact, all games from the league phase up to and including the quarter-finals are guaranteed to pit MLS teams against Liga MX teams.

This arrangement will test the respective depth of these leagues, as teams that might not normally meet in continental competition get the chance to compete against each other.

It should make the tournament more

appealing than the previous two editions, when matches between teams from the same league were, for the most part, met with disinterest and indifference. Continental competition is a chance for unusual match-ups and new tests, and it seems the marketing arm of MLS, Soccer United Marketing, which promotes the Leagues Cup, has realised this.

Once again, the tournament will be hosted in the United States and Canada, which puts the MLS teams at an immediate advantage. Some of the higher-seeded Liga MX sides, as determined by recent domestic league performance, will be given some benefits in the form of "venue privileges," which will see them avoid too much travel and give them a base of sorts.

For the knockout stages, Club America will retain these privileges up to and including the semi-finals courtesy of being the 2024 Liga MX champions, and Cruz Azul have venue privileges through to the quarter-finals, that is unless either face an LA Galaxy side who have home advantage throughout as a result of their 2024 MLS Cup win.

Every team from Liga MX will take part. But, unlike the previous two seasons when every team from MLS participated, qualification criteria were introduced for this year's tournament.

The top nine teams from each MLS conference in 2024 qualified – matching the 18 teams from Liga MX – with the exception of Vancouver Whitecaps. The MLS's newly-introduced cup qualification criteria state that a team cannot enter more than two cup competitions, and The Caps are already obliged to play in the CONCACAF Champions Cup and the Canadian Championship. Instead, their spot went to the MLS's new team for 2025, San Diego FC.

The presence of the Leagues Cup also continues to affect the United States' domestic cup competition, the US Open Cup. This year, MLS will send 16 of its first teams to the Open Cup, having sent just eight in 2024. The addition of the expanded Leagues Cup to the schedule from 2023 is a major reason for teams' non-participation in the Open Cup, and has led to pockets of fan protests against the Leagues Cup.

Liga MX supporters have also voiced opposition to the tournament, not least because their teams don't play any home games in a competition that offers three qualification spots for the CONCACAF Champions Cup.

Still, the revised format makes the 2025 edition more balanced than in 2023 and 2024, when every MLS team took part and outnumbered their Liga MX counterparts. This is partly why Liga MX sides will fancy their chances this time around, despite MLS teams – Inter Miami and Columbus Crew – winning the previous two tournaments.

Of the Mexican teams, Toluca go into this tournament in good form having topped the 2025 Liga MX Clausura standings and then won the subsequent play-offs, defeating another potential Leagues Cup challenger, Club America, in the final.

Meanwhile, the newly-crowned CONCACAF Champions Cup winners, Cruz Azul, had the best league record across the 2024-25 Liga MX season, so will naturally be among the favourites.

The favourites from MLS are more difficult to call. Although LA Galaxy have home advantage throughout, they have been one of the worst-performing sides in the league in 2025.

Two of the best have been Philadelphia Union and CONCACAF Champions Cup runners-up, Vancouver Whitecaps, but both miss out due to the new qualification criteria.

Elsewhere, Inter Miami should fancy their chances, but Lionel Messi's team have been unpredictable in 2025 and have struggled in continental competition since winning this tournament in 2023. The usually impressive Columbus Crew have also been more inconsistent this year, but Los Angeles FC and Minnesota United have started the season well.

Though the Leagues Cup still has its issues, the 2025 edition makes much more sense thanks to increased inter-league match-ups. Whether this results in increased enthusiasm and acceptance remains to be seen.

New boys...San Diego FC will be led by Mexico star Hirving Lozano

Liga MX Clausura winners...Toluca head into the competition off the back of winning the Mexican title

Continental competition is a chance for unusual match-ups and new tests, and it seems the marketing arm of MLS has realised this

Greenland

STEVE MENARY

Frozen out... Greenland at the 2023 Island Games

Greenland frozen out by CONCACAF

After months of delay, the Confederation of North, Central America and Caribbean Association Football opts to reject Greenland's membership application

Football is the most popular sport on Greenland with ten per cent of the 56,000-population playing regularly, but the Arctic island's continuing exclusion by football's governing bodies continues to leave a sour taste.

Greenland's main cultural links are with Europe, but UEFA changed its rules after the contentious admissions of Gibraltar and Kosovo in 2013 and 2016 respectively, which had been opposed by politicians in Spain and Serbia.

Only places recognised as countries by the United Nations could join, which left Greenland – an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark – literally out in the cold.

After years of subsequent inertia at the Football Association of Greenland (KAK) – which has 76 member clubs – impetus grew after the appointment of Danish coach Morten Rutkjaer in 2020. Training camps were staged abroad and attempts to foster links with Europe were abandoned in favour of trying to join CONCACAF.

The confederation for North and Central America and the Caribbean has a number of members in a similar position, such as the Dutch territories of Bonaire and Sint Maarten and four French islands. All are full CONCACAF members but not in FIFA.

> "[This decision] shows that smaller nations are facing extreme difficulties in getting permission to play under their own flag"
>
> Football Association of Greenland president Kenneth Kleist

The Greenlanders aspired to similar status but football politics got in the way.

FIFA also quietly changed its own constitution in line with UEFA's last year.

"Nothing to do" ...Greenland coach Morten Rutkjaer

Worried that this may be adopted by other regional confederations, KAK hand-delivered an application to CONCACAF's headquarters in Miami last May just before the FIFA change.

The bid went ignored for months, leaving Greenland, whose only regular competitive outlet is the football event at the biennial Island Games, in limbo. The 2025 Games were staged in Orkney but due to a shortage of accommodation, a draw was carried out last year and Greenland missed out.

To provide games for the national team, KAK had planned to organise a four-team tournament, but were advised that this might harm relations with CONCACAF, so the idea was shelved.

Eventually CONCACAF general secretary Philippe Moggio agreed to meet a KAK delegation including Rutkjaer in Miami on February 27 – then global politics appeared to intervene. US President Donald Trump suggested that Greenland could be annexed, and the meeting with CONCACAF was cancelled. It was then moved to London on April 4, but that too was scratched at the last minute.

During this tumultuous period, withdrawals from the Island Games saw Greenland receive an invite to Orkney but KAK turned this down, focusing instead on arranging games with CONCACAF members this summer in Europe.

Then, on the eve of the Gold Cup, CONCACAF held an extraordinary congress and presented Greenland's bid, which was unanimously rejected by all 41 member associations.

KAK president Kenneth Kleist said: "This is not a victory for football democracy, it does not make football accessible to everyone globally, and it shows that smaller nations are facing extreme difficulties in getting permission to play under their own flag."

Travelling between the Arctic island and some of the CONCACAF members, particularly such as those on the northern tip of South America – like Guyana and Suriname – would certainly have been problematic, while delegates at the congress were told that Greenland's application did not comply with the norms set by CONCACAF. "I think it has to do with statutes and other requirements," one national association president at the meeting told *World Soccer*.

Sources close to KAK say CONCACAF declined a meeting to explain the "decision and process," and Rutkjaer now says there is "nothing to do," leaving Greenland and its hopes for football more isolated than ever.

NEXT MONTH

Tournament reviews

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CONCACAF GOLD CUP

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FIFA CLUB WORLD CUP

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UEFA U21 EUROS

August issue on sale August 1

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Defections... ten of the Eritrea squad from a 2015 trip to Botswana sought asylum

RED SEA CAMELS RETURN FROM EXILE

If you had scrolled down to the bottom of the FIFA men's world rankings at the start of the year, you would have seen the usual suspects bringing up the rear: US Virgin Islands, Anguilla and San Marino. But even further down, you would have found FIFA's 211th member nation, Eritrea, with the word "unranked" by their name. This is because any country that goes without an official match for 48 months drops out of the rankings completely, and Eritrea hadn't played since a friendly against Sudan in January 2020.

But in May, Eritrea made the surprise announcement that they would play Niger and South Sudan in a tournament held in their capital, Asmara, to mark 32 years of independence (from Ethiopia). After South Sudan pulled out, the Red Sea Camels ultimately played a double-header against Niger, drawing the first match 0-0 and losing the second game 1-0.

Does this signal an imminent return to regular international competition? Unlikely. The country will play no part in either the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations or 2026 World Cup qualification.

The main reason for their inactivity is the risk of player defections. Eritrea has established itself as one of the world's most repressive and isolated regimes under the rule of authoritarian leader Isaias Afwerki. That has led to a spate of defections by top athletes on trips overseas – including the men's national football team. The most notable examples were back in 2015, when ten players were granted asylum in Botswana after a World Cup qualifier, and in 2019, when seven squad members went missing during a regional championship in Uganda.

FROM PUB LEAGUE TO TOP TIER

Gibraltar might be UEFA's smallest member nation by surface area, but it is still home to a top division of 11 clubs – and next season that number will rise to 12.

Described in 2024 by local football journalist Dan Griffin as "the only truly amateur club left in Gibraltar," FC Hound Dogs have officially announced that they will join the Gibraltar Football League (GFL) in 2025-26.

The GFL has been sat awkwardly on 11 clubs ever since Boca Gibraltar went out of business in 2020. But whether the new 12th member, whose name comes from a local pub called the Calpe Hounds, will be competitive remains to be seen. Hound Dogs have finished bottom of the Intermediate League – a division primarily consisting of the Under-23 teams of GFL clubs – in each of the last three seasons and suffered a 17-0 defeat to Bruno's Magpies (another "pub" team) in last season's Rock Cup.

DPMM ON THE MOVE (AGAIN)

Clubs that play in the top-flight leagues of other countries are nothing new – there are three Canadian sides in the US's MLS and two teams from New Zealand in Australia's A-League, while Monaco play in France's Ligue 1 – but Brunei DPMM's participation in two foreign leagues over the years (Malaysia's Super League and Singapore's Premier League) puts them more or less in a category of their own.

Owned by the Sultan of Brunei, one of the world's richest men with a reported net worth of $50 billion, DPMM first ventured abroad when they joined Malaysia's second tier in 2005. After gaining promotion, they finished third and tenth in the top tier, before moving south to Singapore, where they became champions in 2015 and 2019. They then briefly returned home, before embarking upon a second stint in Singapore from 2023 to 2025.

Now, though, DPMM are on the move again. They have announced that they will return to Malaysia's Super League, which offers a bigger stage and tougher competition, for the 2025-26 season, penning a deal until 2028. The campaign is expected to get underway in early August.

Lee Wingate

COMING UP...

Ludogorets v Septemvri Sofia
Bulgarian league, July 19
Ludogorets kick-off their Bulgarian league campaign aiming for a 15th successive title that would break the European record for the longest title-winning streak. They currently share the record with Gibraltar's Lincoln Red Imps and the now-defunct Skonto Riga of Latvia.

Austria Vienna v Spaeri
Conference League, July 24
Spaeri are one of only two second-tier clubs (along with Vaduz of Liechtenstein) involved in the European club competitions this season. Georgia's surprise cup winners will enter the fray when they face Austria Vienna in the UEFA Conference League second qualifying round.

Malmo v Mjallby
Swedish Allsvenskan, August 9
At the time of writing, Mjallby – whose home village of Hallevik has only 1,485 inhabitants – are on track to become the smallest-ever club in terms of local population to become Swedish champions. The trip to reigning champions Malmo will be the toughest test of their title credentials yet.

Internationals

2025 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Finals

Semi-Finals

Jun 4 – Munich
Germany 1 (Wirtz 48)
Portugal 2 (Conceicao 63, Ronaldo 68)
Germany: Ter Stegen – Anton (F. Nmecha 71), Tah, Koch; Kimmich, Pavlovic (Adeyemi 71), Goretzka, Mittelstadt (Gosens 60); Sane (Gnabry 61), Wirtz, Woltemade (Fullkrug 61).
Portugal: Costa – J. Neves (Semedo 58), Dias, Inacio, Mendes; R. Neves (Vitinha 58), B. Silva; Trincao (Conceicao 58), Fernandes, Neto (Jota 83); Ronaldo (Palhinha 90).

Jun 5 – Stuttgart
Spain 5 (Williams 22, Merino 25, Yamal 54 pen, 67, Pedri 55)
France 4 (Mbappe 59 pen, Cherki 79, Vivian 84 og, Kolo Muani 90+3)
Spain: Simon – Porro, Le Normand (Vivian 77), Huijsen, Cucurella; Merino (Gavi 90+1), Zubimendi, Pedri (Fabian 64); Yamal, Oyarzabal (Aghehowa 77), Williams (Olmo 64).
France: Maignan – Kalulu (Gusto 63), Konate, Lenglet (L. Hernandez 72), T. Hernandez; Kone, Rabiot; Dembele (Kolo Muani 76), Olise (Cherki 63), Doue (Barcola 63); Mbappe.

Third Place Play-Off

Jun 8 – Stuttgart
Germany 0
France 2 (Mbappe 45, Olise 84)
Germany: Ter Stegen – Kimmich, Tah, Koch, Raum (Mittelstadt 65); Gross (Kehrer 73), Goretzka (Bischof 65); Woltemade (Undav 46), Wirtz, Adeyemi (Gnabry 68); Fullkrug.
France: Maignan – Gusto, Bade, L. Hernandez, Digne; Tchouameni (Kone 69), Rabiot; Kolo Muani (Doue 69), Cherki (Olise 69), Thuram (Guendouzi 90); Mbappe.

Final

Jun 8 – Munich
Portugal 2 (Mendes 26, Ronaldo 61)
Spain 2 (Zubimendi 21, Oyarzabal 45)
After Extra-Time. Portugal win 5-3 on pens
Portugal: Costa – J. Neves (Semedo 46), Dias, Inacio (Veiga 74), Mendes; B. Silva (Leao 74), Vitinha; Neto (Jota 106), Fernandes, Conceicao (R. Neves 46); Ronaldo (Ramos 88).
Spain: Simon – Mingueza (Porro 93), Le Normand, Huijsen, Cucurella; Pedri, Zubimendi, Fabian (Merino 75); Yamal (Yeremy 106), Oyarzabal (Morata 111), Williams (Baena 92).

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group G

Jun 7 – Ta'Qali
Malta 0
Lithuania 0
Malta: Bonello – Muscat (Corbalan 86), Carragher, Pepe, Camenzuli; Guillaumier, Satariano; Jones (Ewurum 81), Teuma, J. Mbong (Nwoko 81); P. Mbong (Tuma 74).
Lithuania: Gertmontas – Upstas (Golubickas 46, Sesplaukis 74), Kazukolovas, Utkus, Tutyskinas; Vorobjovas (Sirgedas 70), Gineitis; Lasickas, Slivka (Jansonas 81), Dolznikov (Cernych 70); Paulauskas.

Jun 7 – Helsinki
Finland 0
Netherlands 2 (Memphis 6, Dumfries 21)
Finland: Hradecky – Tenho (Kamara 70), Hoskonen, Ivanov (Valakari 76); Alho (Niskanen 70), Peltola, Kairinen, Uronen; Lod (Jensen 55), Pohjanpalo (Kallman 55), Antman.
Netherlands: Flekken – Dumfries, Van Hecke (De Vrij 46), Van Dijk, Ake (Van de Ven 62); Gravenberch, De Jong, Reijnders (Kluivert 69); Frimpong, Memphis (Weghorst 69), Gakpo (Simons 85).

Jun 10 – Groningen
Netherlands 8 (Memphis 9 pen, 16, Van Dijk 20, Simons 61, Malen 74, 80, Lang 78, Van de Ven 90+2)
Malta 0
Netherlands: Flekken – Dumfries (Geertruida 79), De Vrij, Van Dijk, Van de Ven; Gravenberch (Wieffer 46), De Jong; Simons, Kluivert (Weghorst 62), Gakpo (Lang 46); Memphis (Malen 72).
Malta: Bonello – Corbalan (Tuma 46), Mentz, Carragher, Camenzuli (Beerman 81); Guillaumier, Satariano (Azzopardi 81); Magri Overend (Shaw 46), Teuma (Jones 60), J. Mbong; P. Mbong.

Jun 10 – Helsinki
Finland 2 (Pohjanpalo 31 pen, Kallman 64)
Poland 1 (Kiwior 69)
Finland: Hradecky – Peltola, Hoskonen, Tenho; Jensen (Alho 63), Kairinen, Kamara, Uronen (Niskanen 71); Lod (Ivanov 86), Pohjanpalo (Kallman 63), Antman (Pukki 86).
Poland: Skorupski – Cash, Skrzypczak, Bednarek, Kiwior, Zalewski; S. Szymanski, Slisz, Moder (Piotrowski 87); Piatek (Buksa 87), Swiderski (Kaminski 57).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Finland	4	2	1	1	5	5	7
Netherlands	2	2	0	0	10	0	6
Poland	3	2	0	1	4	2	6
Lithuania	3	0	2	1	2	3	2
Malta	4	0	1	3	0	11	1

Group H

Jun 7 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Dzeko 66)
San Marino 0
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Vasilj – Malic (Dedic 46), Barisic (Muharemovic 46), Katic (Bicakcic 84), Burnic; Tahirovic, Sunjic; Hajradinovic, Gigovic (Memic 46); Demirovic, Bazdar (Dzeko 62).
San Marino: Colombo – Fabbri, Cevoli, T. Benvenuti, Riccardi (Mularoni 71); A. Golinucci, L. Capicchioni (Casadei 46), Zannoni; Contadini (G. Benvenuti 71), Nanni (Giacopetti 71), Lazzari (Sensoli 66).

Jun 7 – Vienna
Austria 2 (Gregoritsch 42, Sabitzer 60)
Romania 1 (Tanase 90+5)
Austria: Pentz – Wimmer (Poch 61), Lienhart, Wober (Danso 69), Mwene; Seiwald, Laimer; R. Schmid (Grillitsch 82), Baumgartner (X. Schlager 82), Sabitzer; Gregoritsch (Arnautovic 61).
Romania: Moldovan – Ratiu, Popescu, Burca, Bancu; R. Marin (Sut 61), Chiriches; Man (Miculescu 78), Stanciu (Tanase 85), Dragus (Mitrita 84); Birligea (Alibec 78).

Jun 10 – Bucharest
Romania 2 (Tanase 43, Man 45+2)
Cyprus 0
Romania: Moldovan – Ratiu, Popescu, Burca (Ghita 73), Sorescu; Sut, Chiriches (M. Marin 56); Man (Miculescu 82), Tanase (Alibec 73), Mihaila (Mitrita 56); Dragus.
Cyprus: Mall – Satsias, Shielis, Laifis, Malekkides; Kyriakou (Artymatas 81), Kastanos; Loizou (Ilia 46), Kosti (Charalampous 46), Anderson Correia (Tzonis 62); Kakoullis (Koutsakos 46).

Jun 10 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Austria 4 (Arnautovic 3, 15, Gregoritsch 11, Baumgartner 27)
San Marino: Colombo – G. Benvenuti, Valentini, T. Benvenuti, Riccardi; A. Golinucci, L. Capicchioni (Casadei 63), Zannoni (Mularoni 72); Contadini (Sensoli 22), Nanni (Giacopetti 73), Lazzari (G. Capicchioni 73).
Austria: Pentz (Lawal 46) – Poch, Lienhart (Querfeld 46), Friedl, Honsak; Laimer (R. Schmid 46), Seiwald; Baumgartner (Grull 63), Sabitzer, Gregoritsch (Ballo 46); Arnautovic.

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bosnia & Herz	3	3	0	0	4	1	9
Austria	2	2	0	0	6	1	6
Romania	4	2	0	2	8	4	6
Cyprus	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
San Marino	4	0	0	4	1	12	0

Group I

Jun 6 – Tallinn
Estonia 1 (Kait 31)
Israel 3 (Biton 39, 49, Abu Fani 89 pen)
Estonia: Hein – Schjonning-Larsen, Paskotsi, Kuusk, Saliste (Jepihhin 81); Soomets (Kristal 55), Shein; Yakovlev (Saarma 72), Kait (Ainsalu 81), Sinyavskiy; Tamm (Anier 72).
Israel: Dan Peretz – Dasa, Nachimas, Shlomo, Revivo; E. Peretz (Jaber 67), Abu Fani (Abada 90+1); Biton (Dor Peretz 72), Gloukh, Solomon (Levi 90+1); Turgeman (Khalaili 67).

Jun 6 – Oslo
Norway 3 (Sorloth 14, Nusa 34, Haaland 42)
Italy 0
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem (Ostigard 71), Moller Wolfe (Pedersen 75); Odegaard, Berge, Thorsby (Berg 46); Sorloth (Strand Larsen 83), Haaland, Nusa (Bobb 75).
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Coppola, Bastoni; Zappacosta (Orsolini 71), Barella, Rovella (Frattesi 46), Tonali, Udogie (Dimarco 83); Raspadori (Ricci 83); Retegui (Lucca 72).

Jun 9 – Tallinn
Estonia 0
Norway 1 (Haaland 62)
Estonia: Hein – Schjonning-Larsen, Paskotsi, Kuusk, Saliste (Saarma 84); Kait (Miller 46), Palumets (Poom 90+3), Shein, Sinyavskiy; Kristal (Anier 84); Sappinen (Tamm 84).
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Moller Wolfe (Ostigard 90); Odegaard, Berge, Thorsby (Bobb 46, Berg 90); Sorloth (Strand Larsen 82), Haaland, Nusa (Berg Johnsen 68).

Jun 9 – Reggio Emilia
Italy 2 (Raspadori 40, Cambiaso 50)
Moldova 0
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bastoni, Ranieri (Coppola 83); Cambiaso, Frattesi, Ricci (Barella 46), Tonali, Dimarco (Orsolini 46); Raspadori (Maldini 77); Retegui (Lucca 71).
Moldova: Avram – Platica, Baboglo, Mudrac, Dumbravanu, Reabciuk; Caimacov (Stina 66), Ionita (Dros 72), Bodisteanu (Motpan 58); Nicolaescu (Damascan 72), Postolachi (Perciun 66).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway	4	4	0	0	13	2	12
Israel	3	2	0	1	7	6	6
Italy	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Estonia	4	1	0	3	5	8	3
Moldova	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

Group J

Jun 6 – Skopje
North Macedonia 1 (Alioski 86)
Belgium 1 (De Cuyper 28)
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ilievski (Ashkovski 80), Stojchevski (Churlinov 57), Zajkov, Musliu, Alioski; Kostadinov (Mitrovski 80), Atanasov (Elezi 46), Elmas; Bardhi, Miovski (Ristovski 85).
Belgium: Sels – Meunier (Tielemans 57), Faes, Debast, De Cuyper (Theate 78); Raskin, De Bruyne (De Winter 57), Vanaken (Onana 56); Saelemaekers, Lukaku (Openda 82), Doku.

Jun 6 – Cardiff
Wales 3 (Rodon 39, Wilson 65, Moore 68)
Liechtenstein 0
Wales: Darlow – Roberts, Rodon, B. Davies, Williams (Dasilva 24); Ampadu (Sheehan 64), Wilson (J. James 74); Johnson (Brooks 64), Cullen, Thomas (Koumas 64); Moore.
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Meier (Kindle 46), Traber, Wieser, Hofer, Goppel; Luchinger (Netzer 73), Hasler, Sele (Zund 90); Saglam (Pizzi 46), Luque-Notaro (Malin 70).

Jun 9 – Astana
Kazakhstan 0
North Macedonia 1 (Trajkovski 33)
Kazakhstan: Seysen – Astanov, Bystrov (Mukhamed 81), Maliy, Alip, Vorogovskiy; Chesnokov (Zuev 85), Kuat, Tagybergen, Kenzhebek (Satpaev 59); Samorodov.
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Despotovski, Zajkov, Musliu, Alioski; Churlinov (Mitrovski 53), Kostadinov (Elezi 53), Bardhi, Elmas (Ashkovski 67); Miovski (Ristovski 67), Trajkovski (Atanasov 84).

Jun 9 – Brussels
Belgium 4 (Lukaku 15 pen, Tielemans 19, Doku 27, De Bruyne 88)
Wales 3 (Wilson 45+7 pen, Thomas 51, Johnson 69)
Belgium: Sels – Meunier (De Winter 16), Debast, Faes, De Cuyper (Theate 46); Onana, Tielemans; Doku, De Bruyne (Saelemaekers 89), Trossard (Lukebakio 46, Raskin 75); Lukaku.
Wales: Darlow – Roberts, Rodon, Mepham, B. Davies; Ampadu, J. James (Cullen 63); Johnson, Wilson, Thomas (Matondo 90+3); Brooks (Harris 63).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
N. Macedonia	4	2	2	0	6	2	9
Wales	4	2	1	1	10	6	7
Belgium	2	1	1	0	5	4	4
Kazakhstan	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Liechtenstein	3	0	0	3	0	8	0

Group K

Jun 7 – Barcelona
Andorra 0
England 1 (Kane 50)
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Rubio 75), Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera, San Nicolas; Rodrigo (M. Garcia 65), Guillen (Izquierdo 83), Babot (M. Vales 75), Cervos; Cucu (Lopez 65).
England: Pickford – Jones (Rice 81), Konsa, Burn, James; Bellingham (Gibbs-White 90+1), Henderson (Eze 64); Rogers (Gordon 81), Palmer (Alexander-Arnold 64), Madueke; Kane.

Jun 7 – Tirana
Albania 0
Serbia 0
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj, Ajeti, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Asllani, Shehu (Ramadani 85); Broja (Uzuni 75), Laci, Hoxha (Bajrami 63); Manaj (Daku 63).
Serbia: Petrovic – Erakovic, Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Zivkovic (Nedeljkovic 88), N. Maksimovic (Gudelj 88), Lukic, Terzic (S. Mitrovic 69); Samardzic (A. Maksimovic 69); Vlahovic, A. Mitrovic (Jovic 76).

Jun 10 – Riga
Latvia 1 (Cernomordijs 45+4)
Albania 1 (Cernomordijs 29 og)
Latvia: Zviedris – Jaunzems, Balodis, Cernomordijs, Jurkovskis, Ciganiks; Varslavans (Tonisevs 90), Saveljevs (Vapne 82), Zelenkovs, Ikaunieks (Daskevics 75); Gutkovskis (Regza 75).
Albania: Strakosha – Balliu, Ismajli, Kumbulla, Mitaj; Shehu, Asllani; Broja (Uzuni 82), Laci (Bajrami 69), Hoxha (Muci 60); Manaj (Daku 82).

Jun 10 – Leskovac
Serbia 3 (A. Mitrovic 12, 24, 53 pen)
Andorra 0
Serbia: Petrovic – Stojic (Simic 76), Milenkovic, Pavlovic; Gudelj (A. Maksimovic 61); Zivkovic, Lukic, Katai (Racic 61), Terzic (S. Mitrovic 60); Vlahovic, A. Mitrovic (Stulic 83).
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra, Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera, San Nicolas; Rodrigo (A. Martinez 66), E. Vales (Izquierdo 66), M. Vales (Teixeira 87), Cervos (Dacu 79); Lopez (Cucu 67).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England	3	3	0	0	6	0	9
Albania	4	1	2	1	4	3	5
Serbia	2	1	1	0	3	0	4
Latvia	3	1	1	1	2	4	4
Andorra	4	0	0	4	0	8	0

Group L

Jun 6 – Plzen
Czech Republic 2 (Hlozek 23, Schick 65)
Montenegro 0
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Holes, Krejci, Zeleny; Soucek, Cerv (Sadilek 46); Cerny (Kusej 77), Sulc (Kral 90), Hlozek (Provod 28); Schick (Chory 77).
Montenegro: Nikic – Savic, Vujacic, Sipcic (Mugosa 84); Vesovic (M. Vukcevic 84), Jankovic, Kuc (Loncar 62), Radunovic (A. Vukcevic 63); Vukotic (Osmajic 62), Jovetic; Krstovic.

Jun 6 – Faro
Gibraltar 0
Croatia 7 (Mario Pasalic 28, Budimir 30, Ivanovic 60, 63, Perisic 73, Kramaric 77, 79)
Gibraltar: Banda – Ronan (Valarino 62), Lopes, Annesley (Carrington 62), Mauro; Scanlon, Walker (Bent 86), De Barr (Torrilla 46); Jessop, Bartolo, Richards (Gibson 74).
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic (Marco Pasalic 64), Pongracic, Caleta-Car, Juranovic; P. Sucic (Kramaric 46), Majer; L. Sucic (Modric 64), Mario Pasalic (Baturina 71), Perisic; Budimir (Ivanovic 46).

Jun 9 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 3 (Fredriksberg 71, Johannesen 86)
Gibraltar 1 (Scanlon 23)
Faroe Islands: a Reynatrod – Faero, G. Vatnhamar, A. Edmundsson (Johansen 64); Danielsen, Hansson, Hendriksson (Andreasen 90), Davidsen; Fredriksberg (J. Edmundsson 74), Klettskard (Johannesen 64), Justimussen (Sorensen 64).
Gibraltar: Banda – Ronan (Valarino 83), Lopes, Annesley, Britto; De Barr (Mauro 90), Walker (Jessop 69), Bent; Richards (Torrilla 83), El Hmidi (Bartolo 46), Scanlon.

Jun 9 – Osijek
Croatia 5 (Kramaric 42, 75, Modric 62 pen, Perisic 68, Budimir 72 pen)
Czech Republic 1 (Soucek 58)
Croatia: Livakovic – Stanisic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car (Vuskovic 88), Gvardiol; Modric (Moro 81), P. Sucic; Perisic (Marco Pasalic 88), Kramaric (Jakic 81), Mario Pasalic; Budimir (Ivanovic 76).
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Holes, Krejci, Zeleny; Sadilek (Kral 77), Soucek; Cerny (Kusej 66), Sulc, Provod (Doudera 88); Schick (Chory 77).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Czech Rep	4	3	0	1	9	6	9
Croatia	2	2	0	0	12	1	6
Montenegro	3	2	0	1	4	3	6
Faroe Islands	3	1	0	2	3	4	3
Gibraltar	4	0	0	4	2	16	0

SOUTH AMERICA Section

●6 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot

Jun 5 – Asuncion
Paraguay 2 (Galarza 13, Enciso 81 pen)
Uruguay 0
Paraguay: Fernandez – Caceres, G. Gomez, Alderete, Alonso; Almiron (Romero 87), Cubas, D. Gomez (Sosa 75), Galarza (Villasanti 68); Enciso (Kaku 87); Sanabria (Avalos 68).
Uruguay: Mele – Varela (Zalazar 60), R. Araujo, Gimenez, Olivera (Piquerez 46); Nandez, Ugarte, De Arrascaeta (Alvarez 84); Pellistri (Rodriguez 76), Aguirre, M. Araujo.

Jun 5 – Guayaquil
Ecuador 0
Brazil 0
Ecuador: Valle – Ordonez, Pacho, Hincapie, Estupinan; Angulo (Medina 88), Caicedo, Vite, Minda (Preciado 46); Yeboah (Rodriguez 77), Franco.
Brazil: Alisson – Vanderson, Marquinhos, Alexsandro, Alex Sandro; Bruno Guimaraes (Pereira 90+1), Casemiro, Gerson (Andrey Santos 77); Estevao (Matheus Cunha 63), Richarlison (Martinelli 63), Vinicius Junior.

Jun 5 – Santiago
Chile 0
Argentina 1 (Alvarez 16)
Chile: Cortes – Loyola (Nunez 86), Maripan, Sierralta, Suazo; Vidal (Altamirano 46), Echeverria, Pizarro (Hormazabal 46); Cepeda, Sanchez (Davila 86), Osorio (Aravena 56).
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina, Romero, Balerdi (Medina 79), Tagliafico; Palacios, De Paul; Simeone (Foyth 83), Paz (Messi 56), Almada (Mastantuono 83); Alvarez (Correa 79).

Jun 6 – Barranquilla
Colombia 0
Peru 0
Colombia: Mier – Munoz, Mina, Sanchez, Borja; Lerma (Rios 73), Castano; J. Arias (Campaz 61), James, Hernandez (Hinestroza 61); Duran (Suarez 46).
Peru: Gallese – Advincula, Zambrano (Abram 86), Garces, Lopez; Tapia, Aquino (Noriega 52); Polo (Sonne 77), Flores, Reyna (Ramos 46); Guerrero (Inga 46).

Jun 6 – Maturin
Venezuela 2 (H. Cuellar 5 og, Rondon 30)
Bolivia 0
Venezuela: Romo – Aramburu, Ferraresi, Angel, Navarro; Bello (Hurtado 86), Segovia (Casseres 75), Jose Martinez (Rincon 86), Savarino (Flores 75); Josef Martinez (Soteldo 61), Rondon.
Bolivia: Viscarra – Medina (Arroyo 67), Haquin, Morales, Fernandez; E. Vaca (Matheus 67), H. Cuellar (Villarroel 46); Paniagua (Algaranaz 67), Villamil, Chavez (Velasquez 74); Terceros.

Jun 10 – Montevideo
Uruguay 2 (Aguirre 43, De Arrascaeta 47)
Venezuela 0
Uruguay: Mele – Nandez (Varela 85), R. Araujo, Gimenez, Olivera; Bentancur (Caceres 78), Ugarte; Pellistri, De Arrascaeta (Fonseca 86), M. Araujo; Aguirre.
Venezuela: Romo – Aramburu (Gonzalez 75), Ferraresi, Angel, Navarro; Casseres (Bello 46), Jose Martinez (Segovia 57); D. Martinez (Savarino 57), Herrera, Soteldo (Cadiz 46); Rondon.

Jun 10 – Lima
Peru 0
Ecuador 0
Peru: Gallese – Advincula (Sonne 58), Zambrano, Garces, Lopez; Polo (Pena 85), Tapia (Aquino 68), Carrillo, Quevedo; Guerrero, Flores (Ramos 85).
Ecuador: Valle – Ordonez, Pacho, Hincapie, Estupinan (Torres 81); Franco, Caicedo, Vite (Minda 81), Angulo (Preciado 77); Yeboah (Paez 77), Rodriguez (Valencia 68).
Sent off: Franco 75.

Jun 10 – Sao Paulo
Brazil 1 (Vinicius Junior 44)
Paraguay 0
Brazil: Alisson – Vanderson (Danilo 88), Marquinhos, Alexsandro, Alex Sandro (Beraldo 73); Bruno Guimaraes, Casemiro; Raphinha, Matheus Cunha (Gerson 78), Martinelli; Vinicius Junior (Richarlison 78).
Paraguay: Fernandez – Caceres, G. Gomez, Alderete, Alonso (Sandez 84); Cubas, Villasanti (Bobadilla 61); D. Gomez (Romero 61), Enciso, Almiron (Kaku 84); Sanabria (Avalos 69).

Jun 10 – El Alto
Bolivia 2 (Terceros 5, Monteiro 90)
Chile 0
Bolivia: Lampe – Medina (Rocha 82), Morales, Arroyo, Fernandez; Matheus (Villarroel 78), E. Vaca (H. Cuellar 78), Villamil; Terceros, Algaranaz (Monteiro 70), Chavez.
Sent off: Chavez 19.
Chile: Cortes – Hormazabal, Lichnovsky, Kuscevic (Sierralta 46), Suazo; Loyola (Nunez 70), Echeverria; Cepeda (Urena 61), Assadi (Davila 46), Osorio (Altamirano 46); Sanchez.
Sent off: Sierralta 55.

Jun 10 – Buenos Aires
Argentina 1 (Almada 81)
Colombia 1 (Diaz 24)
Argentina: E. Martinez – Molina (Gonzalez 46), Romero, Otamendi, Medina (Foyth 77); De Paul (Simeone 46), Paredes, Fernandez; Messi (Palacios 77), Alvarez, Almada (Balerdi 89).
Sent off: Fernandez 70.
Colombia: Mier – Munoz, Sanchez, Lucumi, Machado; Rios, Lerma, Castano (J. Arias 72); James (Carrascal 72), Diaz, Campaz (Roman 56).

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentina (Q)	16	11	2	3	28	9	35
Ecuador* (Q)	16	7	7	2	13	5	25
Brazil (Q)	16	7	4	5	21	16	25
Uruguay	16	6	6	4	19	12	24
Paraguay	16	6	6	4	13	10	24
Colombia	16	5	7	4	19	15	22
Venezuela	16	4	6	6	15	19	18
Bolivia	16	5	2	9	16	32	17
Peru	16	2	6	8	6	17	12
Chile	16	2	4	10	9	24	10

**Deducted 3 points*

ASIA Section

●8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot

Third Round

Group A

Jun 5 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 0
Uzbekistan 0

Jun 5 – Doha
Qatar 1 (Pedro Miguel 41)
Iran 0

Jun 5 – Riyadh
North Korea 2 (Pak Kwang-hun 44, Ri Jo-guk 52)
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Alykulov 57, Kim Sung-hye 90+5 og)

Jun 10 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 3 (Turgunboev 28, Shomurodov 86, Sergeev 90+2)
Qatar 0

Jun 10 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Merk 90+5)
United Arab Emirates 0

Jun 10 – Tehran
Iran 3 (Mohebi 74, Taremi 77, Hosseinzadeh 90+3)
North Korea 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	10	7	2	1	19	8	23
Uzbekistan (Q)	10	6	3	1	14	7	21
UAE*	10	4	3	3	15	8	15
Qatar*	10	4	1	5	17	24	13
Kyrgyzstan	10	2	2	6	12	18	8
North Korea	10	0	3	7	9	21	3

**Advance to next round*

Group B

Jun 5 – Muscat
Oman 0
Jordan 3 (Olwan 45+7 pen, 51, 64)

Jun 5 – Basra
Iraq 0
South Korea 2 (Kim Jin-gyu 63, Oh Hyeon-gyu 82)

Jun 5 – Kuwait City
Kuwait 0
Palestine 2 (Seyam 32, Abou Ali 88 pen)

Jun 10 – Seoul
South Korea 4 (Al Hajeri 30 og, Lee Kang-in 51, Oh Hyeon-gyu 54, Lee Jae-sung 72)
Kuwait 0

Jun 10 – Amman
Jordan 0
Iraq 1 (Sajjad 73)

Jun 10 – Amman
Palestine 1 (Kharoub 49)
Oman 1 (Al Sabhi 90+7 pen)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea (Q)	10	6	4	0	20	7	22
Jordan (Q)	10	4	4	2	16	8	16
Iraq*	10	4	3	3	9	9	15
Oman*	10	3	2	5	9	14	11
Palestine	10	2	4	4	10	13	10
Kuwait	10	0	5	5	7	20	5

**Advance to next round*

Group C

Jun 5 – Perth
Australia 1 (Behich 90)
Japan 0

Jun 5 – Jakarta
Indonesia 1 (Romeny 45 pen)
China 0

Jun 5 – Riffa
Bahrain 0
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Juwayr 16, Al Aboud 78)

Jun 10 – Suita
Japan 6 (Kamada 15, 45+6, Kubo 19, Morishita 55, Machino 58, Hosoya 80)
Indonesia 0

Jun 10 – Chongqing
China 1 (Wang Yudong 90+3 pen)
Bahrain 0

Jun 10 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Aboud 19)
Australia 2 (Metcalfe 42, Duke 48)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan (Q)	10	7	2	1	30	3	23
Australia (Q)	10	5	4	1	16	7	19
Saudi Arabia*	10	3	4	3	7	8	13
Indonesia*	10	3	3	4	9	20	12
China	10	3	0	7	7	20	9
Bahrain	10	1	3	6	5	16	6

**Advance to next round*

CONCACAF Section

●3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)

Second Round

Group A

Jun 4 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 5 (Lewis 12 pen, Parfitt 54, Hall 64, Lambe 79, Carpenter 84)
Cayman Islands 0

Jun 6 – Piggotts
Antigua & Barbuda 0
Cuba 1 (Bravo 45+8)

Jun 7 – George Town
Cayman Islands 0
Honduras 1 (Robinson 86 og)

Jun 10 – Santiago de Cuba
Cuba 1 (Aguirre 57)
Bermuda 2 (Parfitt 6, Lambe 74)

Jun 10 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 2 (Montes 49, Vega 80)
Antigua & Barbuda 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Honduras*	4	4	0	0	12	2	12
Bermuda*	4	2	1	1	9	8	7
Cuba	4	2	0	2	6	5	6
Cayman Islands	4	1	0	3	1	9	3
Antigua & Barbuda	4	0	1	3	1	5	1

**Advance to next round*

Group B

Jun 4 – St George's
Grenada 6 (Francis 15, Johnson 36, Francois 58, Isaac 72, Harrack 77, Lewis 90)
Bahamas 0

Jun 6 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 6 (Garcia 9, Sealy 29, 66, Molino 48 pen, Fortune 85, James 89)
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Amory 27, Williams 45)

Jun 7 – Wildey
Bahamas 0
Costa Rica 8 (Martinez 20, J. Mora 37, Bran 45+2, Galo 48, Ugalde 51, Madrigal 64, 79, Zamora 90)

Jun 10 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Simpson 34, Sawyers 90+4)
Grenada 3 (Charles-Cook 49, Francis 76, Johnson 90+1)

Jun 10 – San Jose
Costa Rica 2 (Mitchell 23, Madrigal 38)
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (L. Garcia 58)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Costa Rica*	4	4	0	0	17	1	12
Trinidad & Tobago*	4	2	1	1	16	7	7
Grenada	4	2	1	1	11	7	7
St Kitts & Nevis	4	1	0	3	5	13	3
Bahamas	4	0	0	4	1	22	0

**Advance to next round*

Group C

Jun 4 – Wildey
Barbados 1 (Leacock 7 pen)
Aruba 1 (Luydens 15)

Jun 6 – Willemstad
Curacao 4 (Kastaneer 37, 52, 57, J. Bacuna 74)
St Lucia 0

Jun 7 – Oranjestad
Aruba 0
Haiti 5 (Jean Jacques 29, Pierrot 35, Providence 61, Nazon 67, Prunier 86)

Jun 10 – Gros Islet
St Lucia 2 (Elva 42 pen, 90 pen)
Barbados 1 (Richards 12)

Jun 10 – Oranjestad
Haiti 1 (Deedson 61)
Curacao 5 (Kastaneer 12, Gorre 15, Margaritha 69, Felida 89, Antonisse 90+3)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Curacao*	4	4	0	0	15	2	12
Haiti*	4	3	0	1	11	7	9
St Lucia	4	1	1	2	5	9	4
Aruba	4	0	2	2	3	10	2
Barbados	4	0	1	3	4	10	1

**Advance to next round*

Group D

Jun 4 – Couva
Montserrat 1 (Rogers 2)
Belize 0

Jun 6 – Managua
Nicaragua 1 (Moreno 41)
Guyana 0

Jun 7 – Belmopan
Belize 0
Panama 2 (Escobar 10, Guerrero 50)

Jun 10 – Leonora
Guyana 3 (Ferguson 35, De Rosario 38, Glasgow 72)
Montserrat 0

Jun 10 – Panama City
Panama 3 (Yanis 56, Diaz 88, Davis 90+3)
Nicaragua 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Panama*	4	4	0	0	10	1	12
Nicaragua*	4	3	0	1	9	4	9
Guyana	4	2	0	2	6	4	6
Montserrat	4	1	0	3	3	10	3
Belize	4	0	0	4	1	10	0

**Advance to next round*

Group E

Jun 4 – Roseau
Dominica 3 (Laville 29, 75, Jules 35)
British Virgin Islands 0

Jun 6 – Guatemala City
Guatemala 4 (Santis 6, 59, 62, Samayoa 53)
Dominican Republic 2 (Romero 16, Morschel 36)

Jun 7 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 0
Jamaica 1 (Brown 17)

Jun 10 – Santo Domingo
Dominican Republic 5 (Romero 16, Kaparos 33, Dollenmayer 39, Reyes 44, Gonzalez 89)
Dominica 0

Jun 10 – Kingston
Jamaica 3 (Russell 26, Brown 37, 73)
Guatemala 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamaica*	4	4	0	0	8	2	12
Guatemala*	4	3	0	1	13	5	9
Dominican Rep	4	2	0	2	11	5	6
Dominica	4	1	0	3	5	14	3
British Virgin Islands	4	0	0	4	0	11	0

**Advance to next round*

Group F

Jun 4 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 6 (Anderson 20, 69, Stewart 25 pen, Joseph 59, Edwards 61, Franklyn 85)
Anguilla 0

Jun 6 – Paramaribo
Suriname 1 (Montnor 80)
Puerto Rico 0

Jun 7 – The Valley
Anguilla 0
El Salvador 3 (Ortiz 30, Gil 45+5, Alvarado 77)

Jun 10 – Mayaguez
Puerto Rico 2 (Antonetti 11, Echevarria 77)
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Anderson 47)

Jun 10 –San Salvador
El Salvador 1 (Gil 32)
Suriname 1 (Lonwijk 19)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Suriname*	4	3	1	0	10	2	10
El Salvador*	4	2	2	0	7	2	8
Puerto Rico	4	2	1	1	10	2	7
St Vincent & Gren	4	1	0	3	9	9	3
Anguilla	4	0	0	4	0	21	0

**Advance to next round*

Third Round Draw

Group A
Panama, El Salvador, Guatemala, Suriname

Group B
Jamaica, Curacao, Trinidad & Tobago, Bermuda

Group C
Costa Rica, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFIERS

Group A

Jun 10 – Darwin
Timor-Leste 1 (Joao Pedro 45+1)
Maldives 0

Jun 10 – Capas
Philippines 2 (Kristensen 28, 79)
Tajikistan 2 (Mabatshoyev 30, Umarbayev 42 pen)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tajikistan	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Philippines	2	1	1	0	6	3	4
Timor-Leste	2	1	0	1	1	1	3
Maldives	2	0	0	2	1	5	0

Group B

Jun 10 – Bandar Seri Begawan
Brunei 2 (Nazirrudin 29, Chetrim 63 og)
Bhutan 1 (Tshering 90+2)

Jun 10 – Sulaibikhat
Yemen 0
Lebanon 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon	2	1	1	0	5	0	4
Brunei	2	1	0	1	2	6	3
Yemen	2	0	2	0	0	0	2
Bhutan	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

Group C

Jun 10 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 1 (Rakib 67)
Singapore 2 (Song Ui-young 45, Ikhsan 58)

Jun 10 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 1 (Pereira 90+4 pen)
India 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Singapore	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Hong Kong	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Bangladesh	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
India	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group D

Jun 10 – Colombo
Sri Lanka 3 (Rajamohan 49, De Silva 53, Razeek 58)
Taiwan 1 (Huang Wei-Chieh 70)

Jun 10 – Ashgabat
Turkmenistan 3 (Titow 1, Saparmammedow 37, Saparow 66)
Thailand 1 (Supachai 35)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkmenistan	2	2	0	0	5	2	6
Thailand	2	1	0	1	2	3	3
Sri Lanka	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Chinese Taipei	2	0	0	2	2	5	0

Group E

Jun 10 – Yangon
Myanmar 1 (Than Paing 41)
Pakistan 0

Jun 10 – Hofuf
Afghanistan 0
Syria 1 (Al Somah)

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Myanmar	2	2	0	0	3	1	6
Afghanistan	2	0	0	2	1	3	0
Pakistan	2	0	0	2	0	3	0

Group F

Jun 10 – Vientiane
Laos 2 (Damoth 13, Peter 49)
Nepal 1 (Dangi 73 pen)

Jun 10 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 4 (Figueiredo 49, Holgado 58, Corbin-Ong 67, Cools 88)
Vietnam 0

Current Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malaysia	2	2	0	0	6	0	6
Vietnam	2	1	0	1	5	4	3
Laos	2	1	0	1	2	6	3
Nepal	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

2025 COSAFA CUP

Group A

Jun 4 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 0
Mozambique 1 (Sumbane 73)

Jun 4 – Bloemfontein
Mauritius 0
Zimbabwe 0

Jun 7 – Bloemfontein
Mozambique 0
Mauritius 0

Jun 7 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 2 (Dlamini 40 pen, Okon 78)
Zimbabwe 0

Jun 10 – Bloemfontein
Mozambique 1 (Calcao 38)
Zimbabwe 3 (Ngwenya 27, 36 pen, Makunike 90+5)

Jun 10 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 0
Mauritius 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Africa*	3	1	1	1	2	1	4
Zimbabwe	3	1	1	1	3	3	4
Mozambique	3	1	1	1	2	3	4
Mauritius	3	0	3	3	0	0	3

**Advance to next round*

Group B

Jun 5 – Bloemfontein
Malawi 0
Lesotho 1 (Ntaitsane 87)

Jun 5 – Bloemfontein
Angola 1 (Depu 90 pen)
Namibia 1 (Kamberipa 90+7)

Jun 8 – Bloemfontein
Angola 4 (Vidinho 42, Depu 44, 52, 90+4)
Lesotho 0

Jun 8 – Bloemfontein
Namibia 0
Malawi 0

Jun 10 – Bloemfontein
Namibia 3 (Haraseb 7, Muzeu 74, Kamatuka 82 pen)
Lesotho 0

Jun 10 – Bloemfontein
Malawi 0
Angola 1 (Nteka 48)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Angola*	3	2	1	0	6	1	7
Namibia	3	1	2	0	4	1	5
Lesotho	3	1	0	2	1	7	3
Malawi	3	0	1	2	0	2	1

**Advance to next round*

Group C

Jun 7 – Bloemfontein
Tanzania 0
Madagascar 1 (Rakotondraibe 29)

Jun 7 – Bloemfontein
Madagascar 1 (Rafanomezantsoa 41)
Eswatini 1 (Magagula 62)

Jun 11 – Bloemfontein
Eswatini 1 (Magagula 29)
Tanzania 2 (Nado 37, Khamis 69)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Madagascar*	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
Tanzania	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Eswatini	2	0	1	1	2	3	1

**Advance to next round*

Group D

Jun 6 – Bloemfontein
Zambia 0
Comoros 1 (Madi 31)

Jun 9 – Bloemfontein
Comoros 0
Botswana 0

Jun 11 – Bloemfontein
Botswana 3 (Kgamanyane 2, Semadi 32 pen, Maponda 60)
Zambia 3 (Zulu 45+4 pen, Sakala 52, Jo. Phiri 90 pen)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Comoros*	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Botswana	2	0	2	0	3	3	2
Zambia	2	0	1	1	3	4	1

*Advance to next round

Semi-Finals

Jun 13 – Bloemfontein
Angola 4 (Depu 19 pen, 39, Zine 74, Alem 86)
Madagascar 1 (Razafimahatana 90+2)

Jun 13 – Bloemfontein
South Africa 3 (I. Mohamed 8 og, Radiopane 14, Sebelebele 60)
Comoros 1 (Madi 29)

Third Place Play-Off

Jun 15 – Bloemfontein
Madagascar 0
Comoros 1 (Ibroihim 77)

Final

Jun 15 – Bloemfontein
Angola 3 (Depu 43, 62, Milson 81)
South Africa 0

FRIENDLIES

Jun 3 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 0
Cape Verde 3 (Livramento 35, 48, H. Tavares 55)

Jun 4 – Pathum Thani
Thailand 2 (Davis 8, Poramet 59)
India 0

Jun 4 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 2 (Hamza 6, Sohel 50)
Bhutan 0

Jun 5 – Constantine
Algeria 2 (Belaili 28, Hadjam 58)
Bhutan 0

Jun 5 – Tbilisi
Georgia 1 (Lochoshvili 9)
Faroe Islands 0

Jun 5 – Barysaw
Belarus 4 (Gromyko 25, Bocherov 31, Melnichenko 50, Shikavka 85)
Kazakhstan 1 (Kenzhebek 74)

Jun 5 – Bangkok
Sri Lanka 1 (Perera 57)
Brunei 0

Jun 5 – Bishan
Singapore 3 (Amirul 7, Ikhsan 20, 32)
Maldives 1 (Rizuvan 90+1 pen)

Jun 5 – Phnom Penh
Cambodia 1 (Ratanka 71)
Tajikistan 2 (Samiev 51, Panjshanbe 63)

Jun 5 – So Kon Po
Hong Kong 0
Nepal 0

Jun 5 – Orleans
DR Congo 1 (Essendee 27)
Mali 0

Jun 6 – Plovdiv
Bulgaria 2 (Kolev 27, 61 pen)
Cyprus 2 (Koutsakos 42, Laifis 86)

Jun 6 – Moscow
Russia 1 (Ajayi 27 og)
Nigeria 1 (Arokodare 71)

Jun 6 – Luxembourg City
Luxembourg 0
Slovenia 1 (Svetlin 44)

Jun 6 – Budapest
Hungary 0
Sweden 2 (Nygren 49, Ayari 65)

Jun 6 – Polokwane
South Africa 0
Tanzania 0

Jun 6 – Chorzow
Poland 2 (Cash 30, Slisz 88)
Moldova 0

Jun 6 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (McAteer 21)
Senegal 1 (Sarr 82)

Jun 6 – Glasgow
Scotland 1 (Souttar 25)
Iceland 3 (Gudjohnsen 8, Ferguson 45 og, Palsson 52)

Jun 6 – Marrakech
Cameroon 3 (Boyomo 34, Batoum 48, Soko 69)
Uganda 0

Jun 6 – Fez
Morocco 2 (Hakimi 80, El Kaabi 90+4)
Tunisia 0

Jun 6 – Prishtina
Kosovo 5 (Dellova 23, Vojvoda 61 pen, Emerllahu 71, Al. Rrahmani 90, 90+3)
Armenia 2 (Saipi 8 og, Spertsyan 28)

Jun 6 – Marrakech
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Masogo 45+4)
Gambia 2 (Sidibeh 7, 45+1 pen)

Jun 6 – Mohammedia
Burkina Faso 2 (Aziz Ki 23, Irie 29)
Zimbabwe 0

Jun 6 – Casablanca
Gabon 3 (Allevinah 13, Biyogo Poko 70, Kanga 77)
Niger 4 (Sosah 2, Oumarou 45, Sako 52, Djibrilla 68)

Jun 7 – Marrakech
Chad 0
Kenya 0

Jun 7 – Copenhagen
Denmark 2 (Isaken 45+2, Eriksen 67)
Northern Ireland 1 (Hojbjerg 6 og)

Jun 7 – Heraklion
Greece 4 (Konstantelias 16, Pavlidis 66, Douvikas 88, Hrncar 90+2 og)
Slovakia 1 (Hancko 34)

Jun 7 – East Hartford
United States 1 (McGlynn 1)
Turkey 2 (Guler 24, Akturkoglu 27)

Jun 7 – Toronto
Canada 4 (J. David 4, 24, P. David 31, Buchanan 81)
Ukraine 2 (Zabarnyi 89, Zinchenko 90+2 pen)

Jun 7 – Salt Lake City
Mexico 2 (Gimenez 51, Sepulveda 75)
Switzerland 4 (Embolo 20, Amdouni 64, Ndoye 71, Rieder 90)

Jun 7 – Riga
Latvia 0
Azerbaijan 0

Jun 8 – Toronto
Ivory Coast 0
New Zealand 1 (Just 41)

Jun 8 – Orleans
DR Congo 3 (Banza 28, 68, Wissa 33)
Madagascar 1 (Raheriniaina 90+3)

Jun 8 – Kutaisi
Georgia 1 (Lobzhanidze 45+1)
Cape Verde 1 (Mendes 80 pen)

Jun 9 – Vaduz
Liechtenstein 0
Scotland 4 (Adams 4, 25, 90+2, Hirst 48)

Jun 9 – Marrakech
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Nsue 39)
Cameroon 1 (Aboubakar 28)

Jun 9 – Fez
Morocco 1 (El Kaabi 45+2)
Benin 0

Jun 9 – Niksic
Montenegro 2 (Adzic 5, Bulatovic 52)
Armenia 2 (Spertsyan 1, 81)

Jun 9 – Mohammedia
Gabon 2 (Aboghe 25, Ngoua 90+4)
Guinea-Bissau 0

Jun 9 – Marrakech
Uganda 1 (Mato 25)
Gambia 1 (Manneh 45+1 pen)

Jun 9 – Prishtina
Kosovo 4 (Al. Rrahmani 19, 59, 79, Asllani 90+2)
Comoros 2 (Bakari 12, Said 84)

Jun 10 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Dadashov 7)
Hungary 2 (Varga 5, Szoboszlai 33)

Jun 10 – Celje
Slovenia 2 (Verbic 63, Vombergar 89 pen)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Muharemovic 90+3)

Jun 10 – Minsk
Belarus 1 (Pigas 54)
Russia 4 (Gladyshev 21, 24, 33, 52)

Jun 10 – Odense
Denmark 5 (Biereth 12, Eriksen 18, Dolberg 23, Kristensen 48, Dreyer 62)
Lithuania 0

Jun 10 – Marrakech
Kenya 2 (Osoro 18, Sakwa 45)
Chad 1 (Mahamat Adam 60)

Jun 10 – Solna
Sweden 4 (Sema 14, 39, 50 pen, Saletros 56)
Algeria 3 (Bennacer 64, Benzia 71, Bentaleb 87 pen)

Jun 10 – Polokwane
South Africa 2 (Kwayiba 47, Cupido 70)
Mozambique 0

Jun 10 – Nottingham
England 1 (Kane 7)
Senegal 3 (Sarr 40, Diarra 62, Sabaly 90+3)

Jun 10 – Heraklion
Greece 4 (Pelkas 51, Ioannidis 66, Tzolis 74, Konstantelias 89)
Bulgaria 0

Jun 10 – Debrecen
Israel 1 (Shua 47)
Slovakia 0

Jun 10 – Luxembourg City
Luxembourg 0
Republic of Ireland 0

Jun 10 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 1 (Price 36)
Iceland 0

Jun 10 – Toronto
New Zealand 1 (Stamenic 59)
Ukraine 2 (Hutsuliak 54, Zinchenko 75)

Jun 10 – Casablanca
Burundi 0
Mauritania 0

Jun 11 – Nashville
United States 0
Switzerland 4 (Ndoye 13, Aebischer 23, Embolo 33, Manzambi 36)

Jun 11 – Toronto
Canada 0
Ivory Coast 0
Ivory Coast win 5-4 on pens

Jun 11 – Chapel Hill
Mexico 1 (Pineda 45)
Turkey 0

Club Football SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group A

May 27 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Igor Jesus 38)
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 0

May 27 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 2 (Cetre 10, Gimenez 24)
Carabobo (Ven) 0

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Estudiantes (Q)	6	4	0	2	11	5	12
Botafogo (Q)	6	4	0	2	8	5	12
Universidad de Chile*	6	3	1	2	8	6	10
Carabobo	6	0	1	5	2	13	1

*Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group B

May 27 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 1 (Colidio 36)
Universitario (Per) 1 (Concha 45+2)

May 27 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Mercado 64, Re. Ibarra 69)
Barcelona (Ecu) 1 (Caicedo 24)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate (Q)	6	3	3	0	13	7	12
Universitario (Q)	6	2	2	2	4	4	8
Ind del Valle*	6	2	2	2	8	11	8
Barcelona	6	1	1	4	4	7	4

*Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group C

May 28 – Rio deJaneiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Leo Pereira 66)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0

May 28 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 3 (Alvarado 15, Alzugaray 44, 53)
Central Cordoba (Arg) 0

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
LDU Quito (Q)	6	3	2	1	8	4	11
Flamengo (Q)	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
Central Cordoba*	6	3	2	1	7	7	11
Dep Tachira	6	0	0	6	4	11	0

*Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group D

May 27 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Sabino 26, Luciano 84)
Talleres (Arg) 1 (Girotti 39)

May 27 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 2 (O. Cardozo 45+5 pen, Ramirez 63)
Alianza Lima (Per) 2 (Guerrero 28, E. Castillo 42)

Final Standings	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sao Paulo (Q)	6	4	2	0	10	4	14
Libertad (Q)	6	2	3	1	6	5	9
Alianza Lima*	6	1	2	3	7	11	5
Talleres	6	1	1	4	5	8	4

*Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs

Group E

May 29 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 1 (Martinez 90+4)
Fortaleza (Bra) 0

May 29 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Correa 26)
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing (Q)	6	4	1	1	14	3	13
Fortaleza (Q)	6	2	2	2	8	5	8
Atl Bucaramanga*	6	1	3	2	6	10	6
Colo-Colo	6	1	2	3	5	15	5

**Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs*

Group F

May 28 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 1 (Oliva 88)
Atletico Nacional (Col) 0

May 28 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 2 (Vitinho 58, Borre 77)
Bahia (Bra) 1 (Jean Lucas 54)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Internacional (Q)	6	3	2	1	12	8	11
Atl Nacional (Q)	6	3	0	3	7	6	9
Bahia*	6	2	1	3	5	7	7
Nacional	6	2	1	3	7	10	7

**Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs*

Group G

May 28 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 6 (Estevao 32, Lopez 39, 45+2, Veiga 64, Paulinho 71, Torres 80)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0

May 28 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 4 (Romero 41, Melgar 45+2, Rodriguez 50, Gomes 80)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeiras (Q)	6	6	0	0	17	4	18
Cerro Porteno (Q)	6	2	1	3	7	11	7
Bolivar*	6	2	0	4	12	11	6
Sporting Cristal	6	1	1	4	6	16	4

**Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs*

Group H

May 29 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 0
Velez Sarsfield (Arg) 0

May 29 – Asuncion
Olimpia (Par) 4 (Redes 52, Leguizamon 53, Gonzalez 56, E. Lopez 82)
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Velez Sarsfield (Q)	6	3	2	1	11	4	11
Penarol (Q)	6	3	2	1	9	4	11
SA Bulo Bulo*	6	2	0	4	5	15	6
Olimpia	6	1	2	3	9	11	5

**Enter Copa Sudamericana play-offs*

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group A

May 28 – Avellaneda
Independiente (Arg) 7 (Montiel 26, 53, Tarzia 34, Loyola 51, Millan 77, Echeverria 81 og, Galdames 84)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0

May 28 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 0
Boston River (Uru) 5 (F. Rodriguez 24, Gutierrez 41, G. Lopez 45+2, 65, Barcia 49)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Independiente (Q)	6	4	0	2	16	6	12
Guarani*	6	2	2	2	9	12	8
Boston River	6	2	1	3	12	14	7
Nacional Potosi	6	2	1	3	8	13	7

**Enter play-offs*

Group B

May 28 – Gobernador Costa
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Barbona 67)
Cerro Largo (Uru) 2 (Assis 45+1, Otormin 51)

May 28 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1 (Baralhas 75 og)
Vitoria (Bra) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
U Catolica (Q)	6	4	2	0	12	5	14
Cerro Largo*	6	2	1	3	5	8	7
Vitoria	6	1	3	2	3	4	6
Defensa y Justicia	6	0	4	2	4	7	4

**Enter play-offs*

Group C

May 27 – Cali
America de Cali (Col) 1 (Pestana 90+5)
Racing (Uru) 1 (Fonseca 75)

May 27 – Buenos Aires
Huracan (Arg) 1 (Watson 47)
Corinthians (Bra) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Huracan (Q)	6	4	2	0	11	2	14
America de Cali*	6	1	5	0	6	4	8
Corinthians	6	2	2	2	5	5	8
Racing	6	0	1	5	3	14	1

**Enter play-offs*

Group D

May 29 – Porto Alegre
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Riquelme Freitas 75)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0

May 29 – Mendoza
Godoy Cruz (Arg) 2 (Auzmendi 48, Martinez Dupuy 76)
Atletico Grau (Per) 2 (Bandiera 64, Vilca 73)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Godoy Cruz (Q)	6	3	3	0	10	5	12
Gremio*	6	3	3	0	8	4	12
Atletico Grau	6	0	4	2	5	9	4
Sportivo Luqueno	6	0	2	4	4	9	2

**Enter play-offs*

Group E

May 28 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0
Union (Arg) 0

May 28 – Santiago
Palestino (Chi) 0
Mushuc Runa (Ecu) 2 (Orejuela 70, Penilla 88)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mushuc Runa (Q)	6	5	1	0	12	4	16
Palestino*	6	3	0	3	9	9	9
Cruzeiro	6	1	2	3	5	7	5
Union	6	1	1	4	2	8	4

**Enter play-offs*

Group F

May 29 – Rio deJaneiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Martinelli 2, Serna 34)
Once Caldas (Col) 0

May 29 – Santiago
Union Espanola (Chi) 4 (Aranguiz 17, 58, Uribe 49, Vejar 78)
GV San Jose (Bol) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense (Q)	6	4	1	1	11	2	13
Once Caldas*	6	4	0	2	8	6	12
Union Espanola	6	1	2	3	6	7	5
GV San Jose	6	1	1	4	5	15	4

**Enter play-offs*

Group G

May 27 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Salvio 12, Moreno 21)
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 2 (Paredes 15, 62 pen)

May 27 – Rio deJaneiro
Vasco da Gama (Bra) 3 (Rayan 3, Paulo Henrique 33, Vegetti 44)
Melgar (Per) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lanus (Q)	6	3	3	0	9	4	12
Vasco da Gama*	6	2	2	2	8	8	8
Melgar	6	2	1	3	5	10	7
Academia PC	6	1	2	3	8	8	5

**Enter play-offs*

Group H

May 29 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Lyanco 43)
Cienciano (Per) 1 (Cueva 45+7 pen)

May 29 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 2 (Covea 26, Tegues 34)
Deportes Iquique (Chi) 1 (Gonzalez 54)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cienciano (Q)	6	2	4	0	12	6	10
Atletico Mineiro*	6	2	3	1	11	6	9
Caracas	6	2	2	2	9	11	8
Dep Iquique	6	1	1	4	7	11	4

**Enter play-offs*

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Jul 15: Bahia (Bra) v America de Cali (Col); Independiente del Valle (Ecu) v Vasco da Gama (Bra); Central Cordoba (Arg) v Cerro Largo (Par)
Jul 16: Alianza Lima (Per) v Gremio (Bra); San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) v Once Caldas (Col); Bolivar (Bol) v Palestino (Chi)
Jul 17: Atl. Bucaramanga (Col) v Atletico Mineiro (Bra); Universidad de Chile (Chi) v Guarani (Par)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Jul 22: America de Cali (Col) v Bahia (Bra); Vasco da Gama (Bra) v Independiente del Valle (Ecu); Cerro Largo (Par) v Central Cordoba (Arg)
Jul 23: Gremio (Bra) v Alianza Lima (Per); Once Caldas (Col) v San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol); Palestino (Chi) v Bolivar (Bol)
Jul 24: Atletico Mineiro (Bra) v Atl. Bucaramanga (Col); Guarani (Par) v Universidad de Chile (Chi)

ARGENTINA

Apertura Zone A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Argentinos Juniors*	16	9	6	1	24	9	33
Boca Juniors*	16	10	3	3	24	11	33
Racing*	16	9	1	6	26	16	28
Huracan*	16	7	6	3	19	12	27
Tigre*	16	8	3	5	18	12	27
Independiente Rivadavia*	16	7	6	3	20	17	27
Barracas Central*	16	7	5	4	20	18	26
Estudiantes*	16	5	6	5	18	19	21
Newell's Old Boys	16	5	4	7	12	15	19
Defensa y Justicia	16	5	4	7	18	22	19
Central Cordoba	16	5	3	8	21	22	18
Belgrano	16	3	8	5	13	23	17
Aldosivi	16	4	3	9	18	28	15
Banfield	16	3	5	8	14	19	14
Union	16	3	5	8	11	17	14

**Advance to next round*

Apertura Zone B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Rosario Central*	16	10	5	1	22	8	35
River Plate*	16	8	7	1	21	9	31
Independiente*	16	8	5	3	23	12	29
San Lorenzo*	16	7	6	3	14	10	27
Deportivo Riestra*	16	5	9	2	13	7	24
Platense* (C)	16	6	5	5	13	11	23
Lanus*	16	4	8	4	13	11	20
Instituto*	16	5	3	8	16	20	18
Godoy Cruz	16	3	8	5	8	18	17
Atletico Tucuman	16	5	1	10	17	21	16
Gimnasia y Esgrima	16	4	4	8	9	18	16
Sarmiento	16	2	9	5	11	19	15
Velez Sarsfield	16	4	2	10	7	22	14
Talleres	16	2	7	7	11	15	13
San Martin	16	2	3	11	5	18	9

**Advance to next round*

Round of 16

May 10-12: San Lorenzo 2-1 Tigre; Rosario Central 2-0 Estudiantes; Racing 0-1 Platense; Boca Juniors 0-0 Lanus (*Boca Juniors win 4-2 on pens*); Independiente 1-0 Independiente Rivadavia; Argentinos Juniors 3-1 Instituto; Huracan 3-2 Deportivo Riestra; River Plate 3-0 Barracas Central

Quarter-Finals

May 18-20:
Rosario Central 0-1 Huracan; Argentinos Juniors 1-1 San Lorenzo (*San Lorenzo win 8-7 on pens*); Boca Juniors 0-1 Independiente; River Plate 1-1 Platense (*Platense win 4-2 on pens*)

Semi-Finals

May 24-25:
Independiente 0-0 Huracan (*Huracan win 6-5 on pens*); San Lorenzo 0-1 Platense

Final

Jun 1: Huracan 0-1 Platense

PARAGUAY

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Libertad (C)	22	12	8	2	35	15	44
Cerro Porteno	22	11	6	5	33	18	39
Guarani	22	12	2	8	27	24	38
Sportivo Trinidense	22	8	10	4	27	22	34
Olimpia	22	8	9	5	27	22	33
Sportivo Ameliano	22	7	8	7	23	20	29
Deportivo Recoleta	22	6	9	7	29	31	27
Nacional	22	7	4	11	23	28	25
General Caballero (JLM)	22	5	7	10	19	26	22
Sportivo Luqueno	22	4	10	8	13	25	22
2 de Mayo	22	2	12	8	15	26	18
Tembetary	22	3	9	10	17	31	18

VENEZUELA

Apertura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo La Guaira*	13	7	5	1	20	11	26
Carabobo*	13	7	5	1	13	7	26
Universidad Central* (C)	13	7	4	2	15	9	25
Deportivo Tachira*	13	6	5	2	19	10	23
Academia Puerto Cabello*	13	6	3	4	14	10	21
Anzoategui*	13	5	5	3	17	12	20
Portuguesa*	13	5	3	5	14	14	18
Metropolitanos*	13	4	4	5	17	18	16
Caracas	13	4	4	5	12	15	16
Monagas	13	4	3	6	17	21	15
Rayo Zuliano	13	4	2	7	13	17	14
Estudiantes de Merida	13	3	1	9	15	23	10
Zamora	13	2	3	8	10	17	9
Yaracuyanos	13	1	5	7	12	24	8

**Advance to next round*

Semi-Finals Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universidad Central* (C)	6	3	3	0	15	11	12
Deportivo La Guaira	6	3	1	2	10	7	10
Portuguesa	6	0	4	2	6	9	4
Anzoategui	6	0	4	2	8	12	4

**Advance to the final*

Semi-Finals Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Deportivo Tachira*	6	5	0	1	11	5	15
Carabobo	6	2	2	2	10	9	8
Metropolitanos	6	1	3	2	7	9	6
Academia Puerto Cabello	6	0	3	3	4	9	3

**Advance to the final*

Final

Jun 14:
Universidad Central 1-0 Deportivo Tachira

CONCACAF

2025 LEAGUES CUP

Matchday 1 Fixtures

Jul 29-31: Atlanta United (USA) v Necaxa (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) v Monterrey (Mex); Columbus Crew (USA) v Toluca (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) v Juarez (Mex); Colorado Rapids (USA) v Santos Laguna (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) v Tigres UANL (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) v Tijuana (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) v Mazatlan (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) v Atlas (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) v Queretaro (Mex); CF Montreal (Can) v Leon (Mex); New York City FC (USA) v Puebla (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) v Guadalajara (Mex); Orlando City (USA) v Pumas UNAM (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) v Atletico San Luis (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) v Club America (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) v Cruz Azul (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) v Pachuca (Mex)

Matchday 2 Fixtures

Aug 1-3: Atlanta United (USA) v Pumas UNAM (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) v Juarez (Mex);

Columbus Crew (USA) v Puebla (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) v Guadalajara (Mex); Colorado Rapids (USA) v Tijuana (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) v Mazatlan (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) v Cruz Azul (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) v Pachuca (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) v Necaxa (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) v Club America (Mex); CF Montreal (Can) v Toluca (Mex); New York City FC (USA) v Leon (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) v Monterrey (Mex); Orlando City (USA) v Atlas (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) v Queretaro (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) v Atletico San Luis (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) v Santos Laguna (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) v Tigres UANL (Mex)

Matchday 3 Fixtures

Aug 5-7: Atlanta United (USA) v Atlas (Mex); FC Cincinnati (USA) v Guadalajara (Mex); Columbus Crew (USA) v Leon (Mex); Charlotte FC (USA) v Monterrey (Mex); Colorado Rapids (USA) v Cruz Azul (Mex); Houston Dynamo (USA) v Pachuca (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) v Santos Laguna (Mex); Los Angeles FC (USA) v Tigres UANL (Mex); Inter Miami (USA) v Pumas UNAM (Mex); Minnesota United (USA) v Atletico San Luis (Mex); CF Montreal (Can) v Puebla (Mex); New York City FC (USA) v Toluca (Mex); New York Red Bulls (USA) v Juarez (Mex); Orlando City (USA) v Necaxa (Mex); Portland Timbers (USA) v Club America (Mex); Real Salt Lake (USA) v Queretaro (Mex); Seattle Sounders (USA) v Tijuana (Mex); San Diego FC (USA) v Mazatlan (Mex)

ARUBA

Kaya 6

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Britannia*	10	7	3	0	29	9	24
Dakota*	10	6	2	2	22	10	20
RCA*	10	5	3	2	21	14	18
La Fama*	10	5	0	5	16	18	15
Nacional	10	2	0	8	14	30	6
Estrella	10	0	2	8	11	32	2

*Advance to next round

Kaya 4

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Britannia*	3	2	1	0	9	3	7
Dakota*	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
RCA	3	1	0	2	4	6	3
La Fama	3	0	0	3	1	8	0

*Advance to the final

Final

Jun 22:
Britannia 0-0 Dakota
(Britannia win 4-2 on pens)

HAITI

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Capoise*	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
FICA*	6	2	3	1	5	4	9
Real Hope	6	2	2	2	4	4	8
Ouanaminthe	6	1	1	4	3	7	4

*Advance to next round

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Baltimore*	8	5	3	0	8	2	18
Tempete*	8	2	5	1	9	7	11
Triomphe	8	0	2	6	5	13	2

*Advance to next round

Regular Season Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette*	8	6	2	0	17	3	20
Don Bosco*	8	2	3	3	7	7	9
Racing Haitien	8	1	1	6	2	16	4

*Advance to next round

Regular Season Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
America des Cayes*	8	3	4	1	6	5	13
Juventus des Cayes*	8	3	3	2	8	8	12
Cavaly	8	1	3	4	8	9	6

*Advance to next round

Championship Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Capoise*	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
FICA	2	0	2	0	1	1	2
Baltimore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tempete	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Beat FICA 3-1 on pens to advance to the final

Championship Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Juventus des Cayes* (C)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Violette	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
America des Cayes	3	0	2	1	2	4	2
Don Bosco	3	0	1	2	3	6	1

*Advance to the final

Final

Jun 1: Capoise 2-2 Juventus des Cayes
(Juventus des Cayes win 5-3 on pens)

PUERTO RICO

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Metropolitan (C)	18	15	3	0	82	11	48
Academia Quintana	18	15	3	0	67	15	48
PR Surf	18	12	4	2	50	18	40
San Juan	18	9	1	8	53	38	28
Edusoccer	18	8	2	8	32	40	26
Ponce	18	7	1	10	27	35	22
Taurinos	18	5	4	9	38	55	19
Caguas Sporting	18	5	2	11	28	44	17
Mayaguez	18	2	3	13	28	65	9
Caribe	18	0	1	17	8	92	1

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Defence Force (C)	22	20	2	0	81	19	62
Central	22	15	1	6	61	31	46
Police	22	14	3	5	62	37	45
AC Port of Spain	22	11	7	4	48	26	40
San Juan Jabloteh	22	11	5	6	46	33	38
Club Sando	22	10	4	8	39	24	34
Morvant Caledonia Utd	22	10	3	9	35	46	33
La Horquetta Rangers	22	4	10	8	36	43	22
Phoenix	22	4	6	12	23	46	18
Prison Service	22	3	5	14	24	48	14
Eagles	22	3	3	16	18	76	12
Point Fortin Civic	22	2	1	19	17	61	7

ASIA

AUSTRALIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland FC*	26	15	8	3	49	27	53
Melbourne City* (C)	26	14	6	6	41	25	48
Western United*	26	14	5	7	55	37	47
Western Sydney Wanderers*	26	13	7	6	58	40	46
Melbourne Victory*	26	12	7	7	44	36	43
Adelaide United*	26	10	8	8	53	55	38
Sydney FC	26	10	7	9	53	46	37
Macarthur	26	9	6	11	50	45	33
Newcastle Jets	26	8	6	12	43	44	30
Central Coast Mariners	26	5	11	10	29	51	26
Wellington Phoenix	26	6	6	14	27	43	24
Brisbane Roar	26	5	6	15	32	51	21
Perth Glory	26	4	5	17	22	56	17

*Advance to finals series

Finals Series

Elimination Finals

May 9 – Melbourne
Western United 3 (Botic 20, 31, 62)
Adelaide United 2 (Jovanovic 3, Mauk 79)

May 10 – Sydney
Western Sydney Wanderers 1 (Sapsford 23)
Melbourne Victory 2 (Bos 7, Machach 42)

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 16 – Melbourne
Western United 0
Melbourne City 3 (Ferreyra 16, Cohen 54, Leckie 72)

May 17 – Melbourne
Melbourne Victory 0
Auckland FC 1 (Rogerson 64)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 24 – Melbourne
Melbourne City 1 (Behich 20)
Western United 1 (Botic 66)

May 24 – Auckland
Auckland FC 0
Melbourne Victory 2 (Machach 55, Fornaroli 60)

Grand Final

May 31 – Melbourne
Melbourne City 1 (Cohen 10)
Melbourne Victory 0

LEBANON

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ansar	11	10	1	0	31	7	31
Safa	11	9	2	0	30	4	29
Al Ahed	11	9	1	1	34	11	28
Al Nejmeh	11	5	2	4	12	8	17
Al Hikma	11	4	4	3	12	11	16
Tadamon Sour	11	4	2	5	13	14	14
Shabab Al Sahel	11	4	1	6	14	21	13
Racing	11	1	6	4	4	14	9
Reyady Abaseya	11	1	5	5	7	15	8
Bourj	11	2	1	8	7	21	7
Shabab Al Ghazieh	11	1	3	7	5	18	6
Shabab Baalbeck	11	1	2	8	4	29	5

• *Top six advance to championship round, bottom six enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season halved and rounded up*

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ansar (C)	21	16	3	2	43	11	36
Safa	21	15	4	2	46	11	35
Al Ahed	21	13	4	4	46	19	29
Al Nejmeh	21	8	6	7	26	17	22
Al Hikma	21	6	6	9	19	28	16
Tadamon Sour	21	5	5	11	16	33	13

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bourj	23	10	3	10	24	31	30
Shabab Al Sahel	23	10	3	10	36	38	27
Racing	23	8	7	8	22	32	27
Reyady Abaseya	23	4	10	9	22	25	18
Shabab Baalbeck (R)	23	3	6	14	15	47	13
Shabab Al Ghazieh (R)	23	2	7	14	18	41	10

VIETNAM

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Nam Dinh (C)	26	17	6	3	51	18	57
Hanoi	26	14	7	5	46	25	49
Cong An Hanoi	26	12	9	5	45	23	45
The Cong Viettel	26	12	8	6	43	29	44
Hong Linh Ha Tinh	26	7	15	4	24	20	36
Haiphong	26	9	8	9	29	27	35
Becamex Binh Duong	26	9	5	12	31	40	32
Dong A Thanh Hoa	26	7	10	9	32	33	31
Hoang Anh Gia Lai	26	7	8	11	34	41	29
Ho Chi Minh City	26	6	10	10	19	36	28
Quang Nam	26	5	11	10	27	36	26
Song Lam Nghe An	26	5	11	10	22	36	26
SHB Da Nang*	26	5	10	11	24	42	25
Quy Nhon Binh Dinh (R)	26	5	6	15	22	43	21

Enter promotion-relegation play-off (incomplete at the time of writing)

AFRICA

ALGERIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
MC Alger (C)	30	15	13	2	39	19	58
JS Kabylie	30	16	8	6	42	27	56
CR Belouizdad	30	15	10	5	44	21	55
JS Saoura	30	12	7	11	34	36	43
Paradou AC	30	11	8	11	41	39	41
ES Setif	30	11	8	11	21	24	41
USM Alger	30	10	10	10	26	26	40
MC Oran	30	12	4	14	32	33	40
USM Khenchela	30	11	7	12	28	38	40
CS Constantine	30	9	12	9	31	31	39
Olympique Akbou	30	9	10	11	24	23	37
MC El Bayadh	30	9	9	12	23	26	36
ASO Chlef	30	7	13	10	24	27	34
ES Mostaganem	30	8	10	12	23	31	34
NC Magra (R)	30	7	10	13	23	35	31
US Biskra (R)	30	3	11	16	12	31	20

BENIN

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dadje* (C)	34	17	12	5	44	26	63
Cavaliers	34	16	11	7	41	26	59
Espoir Savalou	34	17	8	9	36	23	59
Loto Popo	34	15	12	7	36	24	57
Dynamo Abomey	34	15	11	8	34	21	56
Damissa	34	15	10	9	38	24	55
Hodio	34	14	13	7	28	21	55
Bani Ganse	34	13	12	9	33	26	51
Buffles du Bougou	34	12	15	7	21	14	51
Pantheres (R)	34	14	9	11	37	34	51
Bembereke (R)	34	10	8	16	28	35	38
Takunnin (R)	34	9	8	17	30	37	35
Abeilles (R)	34	8	10	16	26	33	34
Boa (R)	34	7	13	14	29	41	34
Dynamique Djougou (R)	34	6	13	15	21	41	31
Dynamo Parakou (R)	34	7	10	17	19	39	31
Real Sport (R)	34	6	12	16	27	48	30
Tonnerre (R)	34	6	11	17	24	39	29

*Advance to final

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Coton Sport*	32	16	12	4	34	16	60
Ayema	32	16	7	9	37	21	55
Dragons	32	14	13	5	43	28	55
AS Sobemap	32	13	15	4	40	23	54
Krake	32	13	12	7	35	26	51
ASVO	32	12	14	6	36	20	50
JS Pobe	32	12	13	7	29	23	49
AS Cotonou	32	12	10	10	30	23	46
ASPAC	32	10	15	7	34	28	45
Police (R)	32	10	11	11	29	31	41
Adjidja (R)	32	9	13	10	21	23	40
Avrankou Omnisport (R)	32	10	6	16	29	41	36
Sitatunga (R)	32	7	14	11	25	35	35
Requins (R)	32	8	10	14	31	41	34
JAK (R)	32	7	8	17	26	43	29
Aziza (R)	32	4	10	18	21	46	22
Etoile Filante (R)	32	4	7	21	17	49	19
JSO (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Advance to final

Final

Jun 18:
Dadje 1-1 Coton Sport *(Dadje win 4-3 on pens)*

CAPE VERDE

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Boavista*	6	4	1	1	12	3	13
Palmeira*	6	3	3	0	9	4	12
Os Sanjoanenses*	6	3	3	0	6	2	12
Paulense*	6	3	2	1	10	5	11
Mindelense	6	2	4	0	12	8	10
Academica da Praia	6	2	2	2	6	8	8
Sal-Rei	6	1	2	3	5	7	5
FC Ultramarina	6	1	2	3	3	9	5
Scorpion	6	0	2	4	5	14	2
Botafogo	6	0	1	5	1	9	1

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Jun 7-8: Paulense 2-2 Boavista; Os Sanjoanenses 0-0 Palmeira
Jun 14: Boavista 2-1 Paulense (agg 4-3); Palmeira 1-0 Os Sanjoanenses (agg 1-0)

Final

Jun 21: Boavista 0-0 Palmeira
(Palmeira win 4-2 on pens)

CHAD

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Elect Sport	26	19	3	4	46	18	60
Aiglons	26	17	7	2	46	14	58
AS Psi	26	13	8	5	33	22	47

Foullah Edifice	26	12	9	5	42	23	45
Renaissance	26	10	10	6	26	24	40
Algoy	26	9	8	9	28	30	35
Emat	26	8	9	9	29	31	33
Stars J Talents	26	9	5	12	35	42	32
Galactik	26	8	6	12	23	32	30
CotonTchad	26	8	6	12	27	40	30
AS Dgssie	26	7	8	11	29	38	29
Gazelle	26	7	4	15	28	35	25
Yves* (R)	26	5	8	13	25	39	23
Tourbillon (R)	26	1	7	18	15	44	10

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off*

• Top four teams advance to championship round (incomplete at the time of writing)

Promotion-Relegation Play-Off

May 31: Yves 0-2 Moursal

DJIBOUTI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ASAS (C)	18	12	4	2	44	17	40
Garde-cotes	18	10	5	3	27	12	32
Arta/Solar 7	18	9	4	5	27	17	31
Dikhil	18	8	5	5	27	19	29
Port	18	8	3	7	16	15	27
Gendarmerie	18	6	8	4	21	19	26
GR/SIAF	18	6	5	7	13	18	23
Arta	18	2	7	9	21	29	13
SDC/Hopital Balbala (R)	18	2	4	12	16	42	10
Q5/Nourie Transit (R)	18	1	5	12	17	41	8

EGYPT

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pyramids	17	13	3	1	32	10	42
Al Ahly	17	11	6	0	30	9	39
Zamalek	17	9	5	3	30	16	32
Al Masry	17	8	6	3	19	11	30
National Bank of Egypt	17	8	5	4	22	18	29
Ceramica Cleopatra	17	6	6	5	23	21	24
Pharco	17	6	5	6	17	19	23
Petrojet	17	5	7	5	17	18	22
Haras El Hodoud	17	6	4	7	17	19	22
ZED	17	4	9	4	15	13	21
Tala'ea Gaish	17	5	6	6	13	18	21
Smouha	17	6	2	9	13	22	20
Al Ittihad	17	4	6	7	11	16	18
El Gouna	17	4	5	8	10	15	17
Ghazl El Mahalla	17	5	2	10	16	24	17
Ismaily	17	3	5	9	11	21	14
ENPPI	17	2	6	9	10	21	12
Modern Sport	17	1	6	10	9	24	9

• Top nine advance to championship round, bottoms nine enter relegation round with points obtained during regular season carried over in full

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly (C)	8	6	1	1	22	9	58
Pyramids	8	4	2	2	15	10	56
Zamalek	8	4	3	1	14	6	47
Al Masry	8	3	3	2	10	9	42
National Bank of Egypt	8	2	3	3	13	12	38
Ceramica Cleopatra	8	4	1	3	15	12	37
Pharco	8	2	3	3	8	16	32
Petrojet	8	1	2	5	7	17	27
Haras El Hodoud	8	0	2	6	3	16	24

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
ZED	8	2	5	1	9	5	32
El Gouna	8	4	1	3	10	7	30
Tala'ea El Gaish	8	1	5	2	5	6	29
ENPPI	8	4	3	1	8	5	27
Modern Sport	8	5	2	1	12	7	26
Al Ittihad	8	1	5	2	3	5	26
Smouha	8	0	5	3	2	6	25
Ismaily	8	2	3	3	7	7	23
Ghazl El Mahalla	8	1	3	4	4	12	23

ETHIOPIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ethiopian Medhin (C)	34	22	7	5	49	15	73
Ethiopian Bunna	34	17	9	8	32	18	60
Bahir Dar Kenema	34	15	9	10	40	24	54
Hawassa Kenema	34	14	11	9	40	31	53
Sidama Bunna	34	12	13	9	27	28	49
Wolaitta Dicha	34	13	9	12	34	38	48
Arba Minch Kenema	34	13	8	13	32	31	47
Hadiya Hosaena	34	12	11	11	32	31	47
Kidus Giorgis	34	12	10	12	30	30	46
Mekelakeya	34	10	15	9	36	32	45
Ethiopia Bank	34	10	14	10	34	34	44
Ethio Electric	34	11	11	12	27	28	44
Dire Dawa Kenema	34	10	13	11	34	36	43
Fasil Kenema	34	9	16	9	33	35	43
Mekelle (R)	34	10	11	13	27	36	41
Adama Kenema (R)	34	10	9	15	34	45	39
Suhul Shire (R)	34	3	13	18	22	46	22
Welwalo Adigrat Uni (R)	34	2	13	19	21	46	19
Wolkite Ketema (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

GHANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bibiani Gold Stars (C)	34	18	9	7	38	21	63
Heart of Lions	34	17	9	8	38	24	60
Asante Kotoko	34	16	10	8	37	27	58
Hearts of Oak	34	16	10	8	32	18	58
Nations*	34	18	6	10	40	21	57
Dreams	34	14	10	10	31	29	52
Samartex	34	13	12	9	33	25	51
Medeama	34	15	5	14	44	34	50
Aduana	34	12	11	11	39	34	47
Bechem United*	34	14	8	12	32	28	47
Vision	34	11	12	11	34	35	45
Berekum Chelsea	34	12	8	14	35	35	44
Basaka Holy Stars	34	11	8	15	34	37	41
Karela United	34	11	8	15	28	26	41
Young Apostles	34	10	10	14	24	36	40
Accra Lions (R)	34	9	8	17	32	44	35
Legon Cities (R)	34	7	4	23	23	53	25
Nsoatreman** (R)	34	5	6	23	17	64	15

**Deducted 3 points*
***Deducted 6 points and withdrew*

KENYA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kenya Police (C)	34	18	11	5	38	17	65
Gor Mahia	34	16	11	7	47	24	59
Kakamega Homeboyz	34	15	13	6	39	27	58
Tusker	34	15	12	7	41	36	57
Shabana	34	14	11	9	41	29	53
AFC Leopards	34	12	15	7	41	28	51
Sofapaka	34	11	13	10	37	28	46
Bandari	34	10	14	10	26	30	44
Kenya Commercial Bank	34	10	12	12	36	35	42
Mathare United	34	10	12	12	26	40	42
Kariobangi Sharks	34	8	16	10	29	29	40
Ulinzi Stars	34	8	14	12	29	33	38
Murang'a SEAL	34	9	10	15	25	40	37
Mara Sugar	34	8	12	14	34	41	36
Bidco United	34	7	14	13	21	32	35
Posta Rangers*	34	8	11	15	36	49	35
Talanta (R)	34	9	8	17	33	46	35
Nairobi City Stars (R)	34	8	11	15	26	41	35

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off (incomplete at the time of writing)*

MALI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stade Malien (C)	26	17	7	2	46	12	58
Djoliba	26	15	9	2	45	14	54
USFAS Bamako	26	12	8	6	33	25	44
Onze Createurs	26	12	5	9	30	28	41
Real Bamako	26	11	8	7	33	22	41
Bakaridjan	26	9	9	8	20	21	36
US Bougouba	26	9	5	12	35	38	32
Binga	26	7	11	8	32	35	32
Afrique Football Elite	26	7	9	10	23	25	30
Police de Bamako	26	8	6	12	24	35	30
US Bougouni	26	7	6	13	13	30	27
ASKO	26	6	7	13	16	30	25
Diarra (R)	26	4	10	12	24	38	22
Etoiles Mande (R)	26	5	6	15	18	39	21

SOMALIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mogadishu City (C)	22	18	3	1	62	16	57
Heegan	22	16	3	3	53	13	51
Horseed	22	15	4	3	59	18	49
Dekedaha	22	13	4	5	52	26	43
Elman	22	11	4	7	32	17	37
Gaadiidka	22	9	3	10	28	24	30
Jeenyo	22	8	2	12	33	37	26
Jazeera	22	6	4	12	30	51	22
Badbaado	22	5	6	11	27	49	21
Raadsan	22	5	5	12	33	52	20
Gasco (R)	22	4	3	15	30	61	15
Madbacadda (R)	22	0	3	19	19	94	3

SOUTH AFRICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mamelodi Sundowns (C)	28	24	1	3	65	13	73
Orlando Pirates	28	19	4	5	43	20	61
Stellenbosch	28	13	9	6	34	21	48
Sekhukhune United	28	13	7	8	39	31	46
TS Galaxy	28	8	11	9	30	30	35
AmaZulu	28	10	5	13	29	34	35
Polokwane City	28	8	10	10	19	25	34
Richards Bay	28	9	6	13	19	26	33
Kaizer Chiefs	28	8	8	12	25	32	32
Marumo Gallants	28	8	8	12	26	39	32
Chippa United	28	8	7	13	22	28	31
Golden Arrows	28	7	10	11	20	32	31
Magesi	28	8	7	13	19	31	31
SuperSport United	28	6	9	13	18	30	27
Cape Town City*	28	7	6	15	15	31	27
Royal AM** (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off (incomplete at the time of writing)*
***Expelled*

SOUTH SUDAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamus SSCC (C)	26	21	5	0	89	19	68
Kator FC	26	19	5	2	67	20	62
El Merriekh SC Bentiu	26	18	4	4	79	26	58
Holy Family FC	26	18	4	4	66	31	58
Koryom FC	26	14	4	8	53	48	46
Malakia SSCC	26	12	4	10	41	29	40
Wajuma FC	26	10	5	11	44	30	35
Salam FC Aweil	26	9	7	10	42	56	34
Al Hilal FC Wau	26	10	3	13	33	42	33
Olympic FC	26	7	2	17	28	60	23
Bentiu City SC	26	6	4	16	35	64	22
Lion Hunters FC	26	5	3	18	28	60	18
Young Stars FC (R)	26	2	8	16	27	80	14
Nile City FC (R)	26	1	2	23	31	98	5

TANZANIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Young Africans (C)	30	27	1	2	83	10	82
Simba	30	25	3	2	69	13	78
Azam	30	19	6	5	56	19	63
Singida Black Stars	30	17	6	7	45	26	57
Tabora United	30	10	8	12	28	45	38
JKT Tanzania	30	8	12	10	27	27	36
Mashujaa	30	8	11	11	29	33	35
Coastal Union	30	8	11	11	26	31	35
Namungo	30	9	8	13	28	36	35
KMC	30	9	8	13	26	43	35
Pamba Jiji	30	8	10	12	22	33	34
Dodoma Jiji	30	9	7	14	31	49	34
Prisons*	30	8	7	15	26	46	31
Singida Fountain Gate*	30	8	5	17	32	58	29
Kagera Sugar (R)	30	5	8	17	22	41	23
Ken Gold (R)	30	3	7	20	22	62	16

**Enter promotion-relegation play-offs (incomplete at the time of writing)*

TOGO

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kara (C)	26	13	8	5	34	19	47
Gbohloe-Su des Lacs	26	12	9	5	20	18	45
OTR	26	13	3	10	33	24	42
Entente II	26	11	9	6	24	20	42
ASKO de Kara	26	9	14	3	31	21	41
Gomido	26	8	11	7	27	20	35
Espoir	26	9	8	9	28	23	35
Unisport	26	8	11	7	33	29	35
Tambo	26	7	11	8	30	28	32
Binah	26	8	8	10	20	26	32
Barracuda	26	7	9	10	20	17	30
Haknour	26	6	10	10	28	36	28
Etoile Filante (R)	26	6	9	11	23	33	27
Doumbe (R)	26	3	4	19	12	49	13

OCEANIA

TAHITI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Venus (C)	27	24	1	2	121	32	100
Pirae	27	23	2	2	117	35	98
Tefana	27	21	0	6	88	38	90
Dragon	27	16	3	8	105	46	78
Mira	27	11	3	13	62	54	62
Central Sport	27	9	3	15	52	68	57
Punaruu	27	8	5	14	46	68	56
Pueu	27	9	2	16	63	77	56
Taiarapu*	27	4	0	23	39	101	37
Manu Ura (R)	27	0	1	26	27	201	27

**Enter promotion-relegation play-off (incomplete at the time of writing)*

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